

You Made Me a Believer

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You Made Me a Believer

by [Kat_o_nine_Tails](#)

Summary

Emil did not believe in gods. For better or worse, the feeling isn't mutual.

In which the team assumes their last stand against the ghost horde, but Reynir doesn't reach Onni in time. Emil is the first to fall.

Someone catches him.

Notes

Okay, this happened when I woke up in the middle of the night after a very unsettling dream, got up and spent the rest of the night writing it down. When I had some coffee and came back to it I found 15,000 words of an absolute mess. This is... 'not up to my usual standard' is probably the best way to put it, but I did clean it up the best I could. ~~It's done, start to finish, but it needs a lot of work to be even remotely readable. So I'm going to divide it into digestible chunks and post it as I clean it up.~~ This is obviously no longer true because my stupid ADHD brain keeps *adding things*. I apologise, and hope to finish it within this decade.

Also, I'm Sorry [character name] is a legit tag, and is very applicable here.

Chapter 1

Emil, born and raised in the staunchly atheistic Sweden, did not believe in any gods. He did not believe in magic, or ghosts, or any other supernatural phenomena. His aunt Siv was a doctor, and when she and uncle Torbjorn were still engaged she won Emil over by explaining to him how the Aurora Borealis was made, the way sunlight collided with air and the resulting light danced with the flow of the solar wind. Emil, as a plump and wide-eyed four-year-old, lapped up every word.

She told him everything in the world could be explained with science, and that what may seem like magic at first glance is just natural phenomena that could be explained if studied thoroughly. Emil had listened to her with rapt attention that entire afternoon while Uncle Torbjörn and Siv's parents talked. That day she had won his devotion and been welcomed into the family, and reshaped his worldview for years to come.

Fifteen years later, in the dark of the Silent World, that worldview shifted on its axis.

At first, he didn't believe even when he saw with his own eyes how Lalli's eyes glowed, how Reynir's runes burst into fire apropos of nothing. That Reynir and Lalli could see things others couldn't, and when they issued warnings Sigrun, brave and fearless and ready for anything, listened and suddenly followed protocol. How even Mikkell, who was Danish and just as godless as Emil, suspended his disbelief in the face of overwhelming evidence.

Emil had held out as long as he could, but when an invisible force made kitty lash out and Sigrun and Mikkell faint dead away, Reynir fall down to his knees to pray and Lalli scream like he was being murdered, it was the first chip in the wall of Emil's belief.

Now, armed with nothing but a flamethrower and set upon by trolls and things he could not see, surrounded by the grim faces of his comrades, his *friends*, the last of Emil's disbelief crumbled into ash.

It was all real, and it was more powerful than them.

We are going to die here, he thought, *We are going to die and when we die we will become like them*.

There were ghosts coming, Lalli said through Tuuri. Ghosts that were chasing them because they were still alive and they had souls and the ghosts who could not move on could not stand for it. *Trying to chase the last shreds of memory of being alive*, Tuuri had told them, so afraid and helpless and galled at her helplessness.

She was in the tank now, along with Reynir. The two non-immune individuals among them, who were facing a fate far worse than death if their last stand failed.

Emil had seen Mikkell hand Tuuri a small handgun. *Just in case*, he'd said. She'd grimly put it beneath Emil's bed.

Something told Emil it wasn't intended just for trolls.

"That's all we can do to prepare," Sigrun said grimly while Mikkell had dragged Reynir back to the tank, "It's time we assume battle positions and ask the gods to let us see tomorrow."

Would they even hear us all the way out here, Emil didn't ask. He wanted to. He would have liked it to be true.

The last sliver of the sun disappeared beneath the horizon.

And the area around the tank burst into flames.

"I... Did not set up explosives over there," Emil said to Sigrun, distantly thinking of Reynir scribbling things in the dirt and of the rune that set itself on fire in his pocket.

"Start picking them off while they're startled by the fire!" Sigrun ordered, and then there was no time to talk at all. The first beast that jumped out at Emil had gotten a mouthful of iron for its trouble. Then there were more of them, coming in every direction, and Emil could barely take cover behind Sigrun long enough to switch the clip in his gun. And then another, and another. When he ran out he threw it aside and jumped down from the tank, grabbing his flamethrower.

I do not have enough, Emil thought as the trolls just kept coming. Out the corner of his eye he saw one with a long tail smack Sigrun to the side like she was a ragdoll. *Helvete, we are going to die here. Not like there is anyone around to judge me.*

"*Hail Odin,*" Emil breathed the words of prayer he'd heard from Sigrun, for the first time in his life, "*Hail Thor, Hail Tyr, Hail Freya, the great and powerful gods of battle and war and conquest. Grant us your glorious strength to prevail against our enemy, so we may see the sun of tomorrow.*"

With the last word of prayer he let the fire roar into the face of one troll. It screamed and scampered away, writhing, and then there were more and more of them. Emil was surrounded on all sides in no time and before he knew it he was on his back in the dirt, and two trolls were looming over him, holding him down. Emil held his breath but did not close his eyes, did not want to greet death with closed eyes.

They parted for something and Emil could see the vaguest impression of a shadow that looked like a horse before Sigrun was screaming his name and there was gunfire above him and *something was*

c o m i n g

s c r e a m i n g

let us in let us in let us in

Emil couldn't hold his breath forever.

He

i n h a l e d

And the world was burning.

No it was not the world it was just his house his home and the fire was coming and it was beautiful and deadly and Emil was in love hate fear loneliness emptiness-

There were arms around him, familiar arms holding him to a familiar bosom and Emil didn't understand but he had never been so glad to see his Nanny again.

She took his face in her hands, looked him in the eye and smiled.

Were her eyes always that vivid shade of glowing pink?

“Granted.”

Chapter 2

Sigrun had failed.

She had failed miserably.

The trolls kept coming and kept coming, and then they all turned on *Emil*, her little Viking, and he disappeared screaming beneath them. Sigrun had screamed his name and shot at the horde but they were endless and they buried him and Emil stopped screaming long before she did.

And then the world was on fire.

An eagle bigger than their tank and made entirely of fire swooped down and burned everything in its path. Sigrun watched in awe, at first thinking the gods had heard her, but no. Twigs was yelling his mage cousin's name, and the moment they got back home Sigrun was going to hug him.

Actually, no, she wouldn't. She was going to shake him for not getting here sooner.

Emil was dead.

Sigrun watched the burning pile of trolls that had buried Emil, and wanted to scream some more. Sigrun had lost men before, yes. Troll hunting wasn't exactly a profession in which you can expect to live to ripe old age. But this was different from losinger men. Emil wasn't a man yet, he was a *boy*. A boy who was on his way to be a brave and proud Viking one day, and now that day would never come.

Emil was *dead*.

A heavy and broad hand fell down on her shoulder. She didn't look back at Mikkell, knew that he was seeing the same thing she was.

"We'll bury him tomorrow," Mikkell promised, voice heavy, "But right, now we still have the rest of the team to worry about. One of the trolls broke into the tank. Tuuri said it left without harming either of them, but it's always best to check."

Training and responsibilities kicked back in and Sigrun followed Mikkell to the tank. Puffy and Braidy were peering out of the window, looking a bit shell shocked but otherwise unharmed. Twigs was standing guard at the entrance with a deeply suspicious look on his face. When he saw them coming he leaned to the side to look behind them, as if their missing member was hidden by Mikkell's girth.

"Emil?" he inquired. Like he didn't think for a second Emil might not have made it back.

Sigrun grit her teeth, swallowed and shook her head.

"No," Tuuri whispered, hand over her mouth. Reynir looked like he was going to cry.

Lalli stood frozen, not a single muscle in his face twitching. Then he shot past Mikkell and almost made it past Sigrun when she grabbed his hood with her uninjured arm.

"No," she told him firmly, "It's too dangerous out there. We can go back for him tomorrow, but right now we need to hunker down and wait this out. We will-"

She never got to finish. Lalli twisted in her grip and sank his teeth in her hand viciously. In the split second the pain distracted Sigrun, Lalli twisted out of his jacket and sprinted in the direction of the troll pile.

“Lalli, no!” Tuuri nearly jumped out the tank window. Mikkell stopped her with a hand on her shoulder, much like he did Sigrun.

“Let him go,” Mikkell advised her before she went after the feral scout, “He’s immune, and he’s not going to rest until he sees the body for himself.”

“But-”

“There is nothing we can do for Emil anymore, and he needs to understand that on his own,” Mikkell was firm, “Unlike you. Are you sure the troll didn’t injure either of you?”

Tuuri and Reynir look at each other. “No. It just... Broke in and started thrashing around the sleeping room. At one point it loomed over me and I thought it was going to bite, but then it just... Turned around. Went out the same way it came. I think Lalli scared it off, he came in a second later.”

“Guess it could sense he’s a mage,” was Sigrun’s guess. Trolls didn’t generally turn away from their prey like that unless there was either a tastier morsel around or it was outmatched.

“A most likely explanation,” Mikkell agreed, “And the firebird? Was that Reynir or Lalli?”

“No, it was Onni,” Tuuri said, “Well, it was Kokko, one of our gods, but Onni summoned her. Reynir said he managed to contact him right before we were attacked.”

“I thought so,” Sigrun sighed and clenched her fists around the scout’s jacket, “Couldn’t he have done that literally a *second earlier*?!”

Tuuri flinched. Sigrun felt she should probably apologise for that, since this really wasn’t Puffy’s fault, but then her cousin started yelling from the top of his lungs and Sigrun was too busy grabbing her shotgun.

“What is it!?” she asked Tuuri.

“He’s saying-,” Tuuri looked like she couldn’t believe what she was hearing, “He’s saying Emil is still alive.”

Sigrun’s heart stopped at those words.

A second later, her body was moving on its own.

Twigs was struggling to push one of the bigger, completely scorched trolls off. Sigrun didn’t even bother to skid to a halt, just rammed her shoulder into one of the bony indents and pushed with all her strength until the corpse toppled off the pile. Then they dug and dug until the charcoal gave way to squishy black ooze, and the squishy black ooze gave way to cloth underneath.

Emil was covered head to toe in gunk so Sigrun couldn’t tell how many troll bites he was sporting, but he was immune and wasn’t missing any limbs. She decided to be cautiously optimistic. He wasn’t even burned anywhere. It seemed that, ironically, the trolls that attacked him protected him from the fire with their bodies.

Lalli crouched down by his head and put a finger on Emil's throat. Sigrun held her own breath while she waited for the verdict. Lalli looked up at her, eyes wide with hope and nodded.

Sigrun took a deep breath. "Mikkel!!!"

"An entire horde attacked you?"

"Yes. Tuuri said it was Onni who summoned one of your gods, a firebird, and destroyed them. I would assume that was the reason for his current condition."

"If it is, it's a wonder he's not worse! I don't know much about magic but I did read the Kalevala! And I knew Ensi, his grandmother. If memory serves, a mage who isn't powerful enough to handle the strain would have died. But Siv says he's stable, and he's just going to be out for a long time. I think he doesn't even know how lucky he was."

"Thank him for us when he wakes up, will you? Without him, we likely wouldn't be having this conversation."

"And Emil?" A different voice came from the radio, still in Icelandic, *"Has he gotten any better?"*

"I'm afraid not," Mikkel answered like it was a question the lady hadn't asked for the third time in as many minutes. *"We are monitoring him closely, and so far he seems to be in a similar state to Onni: stable, but unresponsive."*

Reynir stopped listening then. He moved away from the wall of books and went to sit next to Lalli at the foot of Emil's cot. Emil himself was lying on the floor of the storage compartment, occupying the bedroll Lalli had laid on during his own convalescence, with Kitty curled up on his chest.

He made for a strange picture. He'd always been fair, but now his skin looked like porcelain: perfectly smooth, bone white and utterly cold no matter how many blankets they piled on top of him. His hair, shiny once again after Mikkel thoroughly washed the troll blood off of it, had spilled around his head like a halo. Like one of those overdetailed ceramic dolls Reynir had seen in the museum of Old World artifacts. He laid still as death, the only sign of life being the way Kitty rose and fell with his breath. He was quiet, even his breathing making no noise.

But the room was far from silent.

There were *whispers*.

Reynir had heard the ghosts talk, the hoarse wails and echoing whispers. The closer he got to Emil, the more he heard those exact same whispers. Quieter, and without that painful edge of desperation that made his heart squeeze in his chest, but it was *them*.

He could *sense them*. All of them.

They were in Emil's *head*.

Lalli must have figured it out as well. He hadn't moved more than three steps away from Emil the entire time, and hardly blinked. Reynir knew they were friends, even though he was pretty sure they didn't have a language in common. He could only imagine how worried Lalli was.

"Hey, how are you doing?" Tuuri poked her head through the doors, "Any changes?"

“No,” Reynir sighed, “How are the repairs coming along?”

“...slow,” Tuuri grimaced as she said it, “The troll went through the spot where half the cables are, and they’re not marked any different from one another. Plus our gas piping has been compromised, and-,” Tuuri sighed in frustration, “It’s going to take a while. More than one day, definitely. Are you sure those ghosts are gone?”

Reynir struggled to keep his face blank. “Yeah. They’re not following us anymore.” *They don’t need to.*

“Well, there’s that at least,” Tuuri nodded, resolute once more, “Well, I better get back-”

Lalli interrupted her with a rapid stream of Finnish. Tuuri frowned, said something back, but Lalli seemed insistent.

“He’s saying I should tell you to come find him when you go to sleep,” Tuuri translated, “But he won’t tell me why.”

Reynir knew why. He smiled reassuringly at Tuuri. “That’s okay, he probably wants to tell me himself. You can go. We’ll stand guard here in case the ghosts do come back.”

Tuuri nodded and went back to work. Reynir slumped down against the wall and looked out towards the endless horizon, the sun slowly but steadily creeping closer to it. They would have to close the doors soon, but neither he nor Lalli sensed anything in the vicinity, so not even Mikkell was too insistent.

Reynir sighed, and looked at Emil. He hadn’t moved since the last time he looked, so he looked at Lalli. It wasn’t very different than looking at Emil, except for the occasional blink.

“We really need to talk soon,” Reynir told him, despite knowing he wouldn’t be understood. Was this how Emil felt talking to Lalli all the time? “There’s this Pastor Lady, she’s a priestess of the Old World temple. She said she might be able to help with the ghosts if we can find her, but I don’t know where to even start looking. But you’re a scout, and an actual trained mage. Hopefully you’ll have better luck than me.”

Lalli didn’t move. Reynir didn’t mind.

Instead, he decided to get a bit more proactive and put his mask on to fetch a bedroll for him and Lalli. He told Mikkell that they would be sleeping in the storage compartment, since the floor here was busted anyway. Mikkell and Tuuri nodded absently and went back to sorting cables.

Reynir rolled out their cots on either side of Emil. That way they probably wouldn’t miss anything, if some kind of change did occur. The whispers, as they were now, were relatively easy to block out, but if they got louder either one of them or Kitty would notice.

Reynir didn’t know what they would do if that happened, but they couldn’t just do *nothing*.

Lalli had moved the exact minimum amount Reynir needed to set his bed, and then went back to staring at Emil. Reynir wondered if he could see something Reynir himself couldn’t.

Well. He’d get the chance to ask him soon enough.

The sun went down, they closed the doors and set up the surveillance systems. Lalli and Reynir slept next to Emil, and Sigrun, Turri and Mikkell slept in their usual places, though now Mikkell took Emil’s

former bunk. Reynir had just been settling in, though it was still a bit early to go to sleep, when strange things started happening.

At first, Kitty stood up at attention and bristled, whimpering. Lalli sat up and Reynir tensed, trying to figure out what was setting her off. Kitty made a sound he'd never heard from her before and shot off towards the door, scratching to be let out.

When she got away, Reynir realised she wasn't the one making those noises.

It was Emil.

“Emil?” Lalli poked him in the cheek, wide-eyed and hopeful, but Emil didn't react. Soon those whimpers turned into groans, and Lalli's pokes turned into forceful shaking, “Emil! Herää!”

Emil's brows scrunched together and his lips drew back over clenched teeth. Reynir noticed he had started to sweat and instinctively put a hand on his forehead.

This wasn't just a nightmare. Emil was *burning up*.

“I'll get Mikkel,” Reynir jumped up and went to the door just as Emil started screaming.

Tuuri was still poking at the wires in the tank, no matter how much Mikkel urged her to rest up a bit. She was close to getting everything working, she knew it! Sigrun was right, they could not afford to stay here long. The scent of burning troll flesh was keeping the grosslings away for time being, but eventually the smell would settle and the snow would cover the remains. They had to be far away from the open area before anything hungry decided to go looking for them.

She was so, so close when the screaming started.

“What is it? Are we being attacked?” she barely had time to ask before Reynir was bursting into their compartment.

“Emil just started screaming!” Reynir yelled to Mikkel, “He has a fever and he looks like he's in pain!” As if to punctuate his point, Emil screamed louder.

Mikkel, cool as a cucumber, quickly got up and marched out without even putting on his coat, Sigrun following close behind with her shotgun. Tuuri scrambled up after them, then backtracked to grab their uniform jackets. The last thing they needed was even more people falling ill, honestly, were the Finns really the only ones with any sense about these-

The sight that greeted her made her forget all about the cold.

Emil was on the floor, back bent into a painful-looking arch, screaming and writhing like he was being eaten alive, clutching his head in pain. Lalli was kneeling over him, looking as afraid as Tuuri had ever seen him. His hands were holding Emil's to try and stop him from ripping his hair out. He looked like he was quietly singing a runo.

Mikkel didn't shoo him away. He knelt on Reynir's cot and put a hand on Emil's forehead, then frowned thunderously. “Get me as many towels as you can find, and a basin with water. Mix it with some snow.”

“Is it that ba-”

“ *Now.* ”

Reynir jumped and started running, not wearing a coat either. Tuuri, frozen to the spot, didn't think to give him one.

“Mikkel, can you shut him up?” Sigrun yelled over Emil, “He's going to bring every troll in a ten klick radius to us, and we're sitting ducks!”

“I'm aware of that Sigrun!” Mikkel yelled back, “But if we're going to do that we need to bring his fever down before it boils his brain!”

Reynir burst back in then, dumped the towels on Mikkel and barely stopped the basin from spilling water everywhere, then ran back out at the same breakneck speed. Mikkel didn't even say a word, just put one of the wet towels on Emil's head and directed Lalli's hand on top of it.

“Gods dammit, we're going to be overrun again!” Sigrun cursed, then turned to Tuuri, “Puffy, you need to take your cousin's place and get him to come out and help me! There's no way we haven't attracted some unwelcome company by now, and I need all available hands holding guns *now!*”

Tuuri, still holding their coats at the entrance, looked at Emil screaming and thrashing and Lalli desperately trying to keep him still, and Mikkel taking Emil's clothes off to try and cool him off. If their expressions were anything to go by, they were going to fail and they knew it.

Perhaps it made her a horrible person, but Tuuri did not want to take a single step closer to them.

She did not want to see Emil die in her arms.

Sigrun looked like she was going to start yelling again to get her moving, but then Reynir shouldered past them with an armful of snow, which he unceremoniously dumped into the basin.

“Mikkel!” Sigrun yelled, changing tactics, “Get Braidy to switch places with Twigs, I need him out here with a gun yesterday!”

Mikkel ignored her, too busy placing wet towels over Emil's body. Reynir had already started helping him, handing over snow-packed towels and accepting lukewarm ones. In Tuuri's semi-expert opinion, the snow was melting far, far too fast on Emil's body. The temperature it would need to do that was-

“Dammit people, you are all going to the mutiny list, I swear! Tuuri!!!” Sigrun grabbed her by the shoulders and *shook*, “Listen to me! Gaping won't help him! And there will be nobody left to help him at all if we're overrun again! We can't all roll over and die just when we survived the first attack! Do you *want* to die here? No? Then I need you and Lalli to *move!!!*”

Sigrun's yelling finally did the trick.

Tuuri dropped the coats.

Slowly, afraid of looking down too far, she came into the storage room and grabbed Lalli by the shoulders.

“Lalli, Sigrun needs you out there. She needs someone else to watch out for trolls.”

“No.” Lalli flat out refused, then winced as another of Emil's screams ripped through the air.

“Please, Lalli,” Tuuri begged him, “Let Mikkell make Emil better, and you need to make sure he’s not eaten by trolls while he’s sick.”

“Not sick!” Lalli yelled back and started chanting again. Before he could even start on the name of the god Tuuri slapped a hand over his mouth, grabbed him by the shirt and *pulled*.

“Listen to me, scout!” Tuuri screamed louder than Emil, putting every ounce of authority she had into her voice, “This is your duty! This is your responsibility! You need to do your job so the rest of the team can do theirs! If you don’t, then you have *failed*, do you understand me?! What good are you if you can’t even do your job?!”

Lalli’s face melted from rage and fear into perfect blankness. Tuuri didn’t let go of him, simply didn’t dare.

Below them, Emil continued to scream. How was his throat not bleeding already?

“Sigrun needs you out there,” she told him desperately, “Emil needs you out there. There is nothing you can do *here*, but there is plenty out there. You need to *go*.”

And Lalli... Went. Took his shotgun and didn’t even change into his uniform, just went to stand next to Sigrun. Their captain made a few tactical signals, to which Lalli nodded. Then they separated into opposite directions.

Tuuri stood there, frozen to the spot, and felt like a monster.

“Close the doors!” Mikkell yelled, “The less sound is coming out the better!”

Tuuri didn’t want to. She did it anyway.

She deserved nothing less.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The fever and the screaming broke almost as quickly as they had started. By Mikkell's estimate, only around half an hour passed from the moment the first screams began to Emil finally collapsing into a dead faint. The fever broke soon after.

By the end of it, Reynir looked about as pale as Mikkell's actual patient. Tuuri had drawn herself into the farthest corner from them, looking like she would have preferred to be back in the sleeping room with the troll that almost bit her. When the screaming finally stopped, she started quietly sobbing.

"He's alive, Tuuri," Mikkell said in Icelandic, "And he's stable right now."

Tuuri turned around in disbelief, but Mikkell just let her see the rise and fall of Emil's naked chest for herself. The moment she saw him she started crying in earnest, this time with relief.

"Thank the gods," she whispered, "Thank the gods."

When Reynir looked like he was going to join her any second, Mikkell gently but firmly shooed them away into the sleeping chambers, promising to clean up by himself. He dried Emil off completely, bundled him up into clothes and blankets and some stray coats, then picked up the basin and the towels and opened the doors.

Lalli squeezed through the moment Mikkell cracked the doors open. Knowing words would be wasted on him, and someone needed to stay with Emil anyway, Mikkell said nothing. Just closed the doors behind him and went to put his things away.

"How bad is it?" Sigrun asked him as he was hanging the towels up to dry over the sink, "Be honest with me, medic. How long does he have?"

"The gods willing," Mikkell pretended to do some math in his head, "Around sixty more."

"Hours or days?" Sigrun asked, looking like she hoped the answer wouldn't be minutes.

"Years," Mikkell assured her, smile half mischievous and half comforting. Sigrun looked like she wanted to punch him, so he hurried to add, "Far as I can tell, he's fine. The fever broke about half an hour in. He's exhausted, and probably hoarse, but I can't find anything else wrong with him."

"Nothing wrong?" Sigrun asked incredulously, "Did you somehow miss the fact that he's been passed out for an entire day, and then just started screaming from the top of his lungs for no reason?!"

"I did not," Mikkell put up another towel, "But I am starting to think his ailment is out of my area of expertise."

"Out of your-? I thought you were a medic!"

"I am. I think this is not a medical condition," Mikkell said, then elaborated, "Tell me, Sigrun. Who was the last person you saw faint, sleep for over a day, and start screaming seemingly unprompted?"

Sigrun looked at him incredulously. “Well, Twigs. But Puffy said it was mage stuff. Emil’s not a mage, and definitely not a Finnish one.”

“Maybe not. But there is another person who is a Finnish mage, who helped us during the attack, and is in a similar condition.”

“Puffy’s brother?” Sigrun looked like she was connecting the dots as well, “So, what? You think those are related? How?”

“I do not know,” Mikkel said, “As I said, magic is rather far out of my area of expertise. But if I had to hazard a guess... The elder Hottakainen summoned a firebird. Emil was the one with the flamethrower. Perhaps he’d used Emil as a conduit, and Emil, not being a mage, was not able to handle it, resulting in his current condition matching that of the elder Hotakainen.”

“And the screaming?” Sigrun asked, “What was that about? I can’t figure out what set him off. With Twigs it was ghosts, but he already knows the word for them, and he didn’t report anything when I sent him out. We didn’t even find any trolls, and I checked the woods.”

Mikkel paused at that. “Are you sure? Neither of you found anything?”

“Not even a rat beast,” Sigrun frowned thunderously, “It’s weird. Pretty Boy was screaming for all the Silent World to hear, and nothing came to see what all the fuss was about?”

“Hmm, that is unusual,” Mikkel wrung out the last towel and hung it up on the wire above the sink, “Perhaps the firebird left more of an impression than we previously thought. If that is the case, for as long as that impression lasts, this is perhaps the safest area in the Silent World.”

“There was a lot of ‘perhaps’ in that speech,” Sigrun said, not looking any happier than she did when she had no idea what was going on, “And you still haven’t explained the screaming.”

Mikkel sighed. “If my theory about having established a connection is right, it would be safe to assume that it goes both ways.”

“You mean-”

“Nothing yet. Emil is still alive and mostly hale, and until we get a confirmation either way, we will assume Onni is as well.”

“So we tell Tuuri nothing, right?”

“Exactly. Now,” Mikkel dried his hands and fully turned to Sigrun, “How is your arm?”

“...mrglf,” Sigrun grumbled something unintelligible and pulled her sleeve up, revealing yellow-stained bandages. Mikkel grabbed a fresh roll and went about rewrapping Sigrun’s arm.

“Hey, did you give some of that anti-infection stuff to Emil?” Sigrun asked in the middle of having the pus squeezed out of her wounds, “He was attacked by a dozen trolls, he won’t stop bitching until our next expedition if all of those bites scar. Swedes are weird like that, you know? For some reason they don’t appreciate battle scars *at all*. ”

“Then I suppose he was lucky in that regard,” Mikkel told her, not bothering to correct her assumption that antibiotic cream would help with scarring, “He doesn’t have a scratch on him. It seems Onni summoned his firebird in the nick of time.”

Sigrun looked at him like he'd lost his mind. "That's impossible."

"Not really, it's just a matter of-"

"He was attacked long before Puffy's brother summoned his pet bird," Sigrun told him insistently, "He was screaming as they piled on top of him. I tried to shoot them but there were too many- He'd stopped screaming well before the fire began."

Mikkel paused. "I checked him over thoroughly, both today and after the attack. He is neither bitten nor scratched. He's barely bruised. If you hadn't told me he was attacked before the fire I wouldn't have guessed it at all."

Sigrun frowned thunderously again. "This is getting weirder by the minute. Emil gets attacked but not even nipped, the ghosts are gone and no creature alive or dead dares to approach us now. Just what the Hell did Puffy's brother *do?* "

"I will be sure to ask him the moment he wakes up," Mikkel promised.

"You'd better! Done yet?"

"Almost," Mikkel tied off the end of Sigrun's fresh bandages and let her go, "Remember, try not to strain it, and if the pain or the temperature increase you must tell me immediately."

"Yeah, yeah," Sigrun pulled her sleeve down dismissively, "Since our scout is being useless I'll do another perimeter check."

"Are you sure that's a wise idea?"

"I'll be back soon, not like I have a lot of work to do since we're not moving anytime soon. I just..." Sigrun frowned, trying and failing not to look uncomfortable, "Everything about this situation is giving me the creeps. Something is wrong here, and the sooner we find out what, the better."

"If you say so," Mikkel agreed placidly. Sigrun saw right through him.

"You don't think so?"

"No, no, I agree with you," Mikkel admitted, "But there is a lot about this situation that is far from ideal. I am not sure putting yourself into even more unnecessary risk is a wise idea, especially during the night."

"Gods dammit, you people are the most insubordinate team I have ever worked with!" Sigrun spat, "Unnecessary risk?! How is being aware of our situation unnecessary? Emil almost died, Mikkel! Still might! If we're attacked again we could all die!"

"Sigrun-"

"I can't just sit there and do *nothing!*" she all but screamed into his face, her eyes just a bit redder than they were a moment ago, "I am the leader here! I am responsible for this team! It's my job to get those kids home, and I will be damned to Hell and back if I don't do everything in my power to make that happen!" she quieted down a little, looking at Mikkel beseechingly, "They're goddamn *kids*, Mikkel."

"I know," he sighed. Feeling daring, he drew Sigrun closer and enveloped her into a hug. She tensed for a moment and then wrapped her arms around him and *squeezed*. She didn't cry and didn't sob,

didn't even shake. Just held him like he was the only thing holding her together at the moment.

A minute passed. Her desperate grip on him loosened and he let her go reluctantly.

"I'm going to do a perimeter check," Sigrun said resolutely, her eyes dry and hard, but once again clear, "I'll be back in half an hour tops."

"I'll be holding you to that."

Sigrun turned to leave, then paused at the door. "Thanks, Mikkel."

Mikkel smiled. "Isn't that what I'm here for?"

"This is going a bit beyond the job description," Sigrun let out a little huff of laughter, "If you're this dedicated to all of your jobs, you might want to stop by Dalsnes. We could use a man like you."

Mikkel was surprised, to say the least, but by the time he collected his wits Sigrun was already outside, out of earshot.

Well then.

Lalli couldn't sleep.

That was highly unusual. Although, considering the circumstances, perhaps not entirely surprising.

Next to him, Emil was still and unnaturally silent. Next to Emil, the stupid Iclander had a blanket pulled over his head, having about as much luck trying to sleep as Lalli did. Kitty hadn't even bothered to return.

So much about meeting tonight.

Lalli laid on his back and stared at the ceiling. The open space above him seemed vast and looming and unsafe, not at all helping Lalli's insomnia. But even if he was under Tuuri's bunk, his cousin softly murmuring in her sleep, he doubted he would be having more luck than this.

The screaming was still ringing in his ears. Both Emil's and Tuuri's.

He couldn't stop feeling like he had made a horrible mistake somewhere down the line, a mistake that had landed them all in the current situation. After all, a single mistake on Grandma's part had ended up with their entire village being destroyed, and history did so love repeating itself.

The Iclander - no, fine, *Reynir*, he supposed he should get used to calling him by his name if they did end up talking regularly - shuffled under his covers, obviously trying to be quiet. Lalli didn't even bother trying to inform him how miserably he was failing.

But that was the theme of the day, wasn't it? Failure. On his part, on Onni's part, on Reynir's part, on-

Goddamn stupid, messy Swede, Lalli thought, Heart so open even ghosts couldn't resist the warmth you radiate like the sun. And now look where all that stupid compassion got you. A head full of the evil dead.

And I can't do anything about it.

Onni might have, but Onni had blown all his power on summoning Kokko. And even if he hadn't, Lalli wasn't so sure he would know what to do in this situation. This wasn't an ordinary possession, requiring an exorcism and guiding the restless spirit to Tuonela. This was countless souls, deformed from fear and rage and nearly a century of wandering, inhabiting a live human. Lalli had never heard of anything like this. The closest thing to this situation he could think of was-

*No, Lalli's fingers twisted in the bedding, Emil is not turning into **that** . He's not even a mage, he can't be!*

But who was to say he wasn't something similar? the voice of his grandmother reminded him, This is the work of foreign magic, one you know nothing about, and the only mage you could ask knows even less. He could be becoming a monster this very moment and you wouldn't know until it's too late.

"No," Lalli clamped his hands over his ears even though he knew it would do little to help. He hated this, hated the noise. Even without ghosts and trolls around it was never quiet in his head, and the voices that were his own were so much harder to block out.

No wonder Emil decided being in a coma was so much easier.

"Get ekki heldur sofið?" Reynir sighed softly from the other side, "Fyrirgefðu. Ég held að ég muni ekki geta fundið þig í kvöld."

Lalli had no idea what he was saying, but his tone was heavy with apologies so he could guess.

Maybe it was better that neither of them ventured into the Dreamsea tonight. Besides the beast waiting for them in its depths, there were now ghosts residing right next to their sleeping space. Lalli didn't know if they'd somehow become trapped in Emil's head, or were simply staying there until a better option presented itself.

If that was the case, sleeping next to Emil and leaving his area would be tantamount to suicide.

Lalli turned his back to Emil and stubbornly closed his eyes.

He would not prove himself useless twice.

Chapter End Notes

"Can't sleep either?" "I'm sorry. I do not think I will be able to find you tonight. "

I don't speak a lick of Icelandic, so all translations are achieved with Google Translate. I apologize in advance.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

I think I forgot around this part that I wasn't writing Lallikatt. Eh, in both of those Lalli is in love and stupid about it, so this tracks.

Morning dawned cold and grey and damp and barely visible behind the clouds, but it dawned all the same. Lalli was the first one up, followed soon after by Sigrun. When she noticed him awake she made a few gestures he'd learned to interpret as 'report what you found'. He hadn't been scouting last night, so he guessed she meant if he could sense something.

"No ghosts," he said in halting Swedish, "No trolls."

Sigrun frowned uncomfortably. She let out a stream of gibberish Lalli couldn't pick apart, but he did catch that she didn't like something. There was a lot not to like about everything here, more than they could communicate between them, so Lalli didn't bother to try.

"Emil?" Sigrun asked him after a minute, "Better? No?"

"No better," Lalli confessed, "No... more bad. Same."

Sigrun didn't seem happy about that report but didn't say anything else. Lalli got the feeling she was just as worried as he was. Emil *was* her favorite.

He could even guess why. He seemed to understand Sigrun's enthusiasm and energy, was even encouraged by it. Unlike Lalli, who had to be told that the shoulder punches she dealt out were meant to be a friendly gesture instead of admonishment. Emil had tried to tell Lalli that, but he also explained it to Sigrun. Lalli knew he did, because instead of punching him she started patting him on the back. It was still more forceful than Lalli was strictly comfortable with, but now it fell within the realm of 'tolerable'.

That was the thing about Emil. He *understood* people. Maybe not at first, and he put his foot in his mouth often enough, but it had taken him all of a week to adapt to everyone around him. Tuuri had tried to do the same, but she tried too hard to adapt to what she thought others would have liked her to be. When Lalli complained about the punching to her, she'd just told him that was the way Norwegians said 'good job' and didn't even try to tell their captain to do something else.

Lalli thought that was the difference, when it came down to it. When Tuuri wanted to make friends, she first sought to learn their language. When Emil wanted to make friends, he taught just as much as he learned. Both approaches worked, but Lalli liked Emil's way better.

Sigrun startled him back to awareness by poking his cheek.

"No sleep?" she asked. Lalli glared at her but he did eventually shake his head. Sigrun said some more gibberish, sighed, and went back to the sleeping quarters.

Lalli was once again left alone with his thoughts. He wasn't even surprised when they ran back to Emil.

He wondered if he would ever wake up. He had hoped he would, but at some point Lalli had to get realistic, because what happened to Emil not even grandma would have been able to handle. You couldn't pacify a ghost you couldn't lead to the afterlife. If you couldn't do that, there is nothing you could do for it. Seal it away perhaps, but if grandma had ever known how to do that, she died before she could teach it to Lalli and Onni.

The only way those ghosts would leave was if someone made them leave or...

Or something else took them in.

"Hey, Lalli," Tuuri wandered over, still a little bleary eyed, "How are you doing?"

"Fine," Lalli muttered. He wasn't in the mood for conversation.

"Sigrun said you didn't get any sleep last night," she tilted her head to peer at his face, "And I can tell she was right. She's doing the scouting now."

That made Lalli sit up at attention. "But I'm the scout! Why didn't she tell me?"

"Calm down Lalli," Tuuri pushed him back down, "She just went to check the surrounding area. You don't need to find a travel route since we're not going anywhere today," she sighed in frustration, "Honestly, I'm not sure if we're going anywhere tomorrow either. Even if we fix the damage in the sleeping compartment, our engine is compromised. At this point I'm starting to think it would be better to take it apart and put it back together."

"Then we will have to walk," Lalli could see where this was going, "I need to-"

"No," Tuuri cut him off, "I *will* get it fixed. *You* need to be well rested for the time we do set out."

Lalli said nothing. He knew being fit enough to do his job was important. It didn't mean he had to like it.

"Lalli," Tuuri looked guilty, "Look, I- I'm really sorry I yelled at you yesterday, and what I said to you. I didn't actually *mean* it, I promise. You are more useful than just as a scout. I just... It was a bad situation and I didn't know how to get you moving. Sigrun yelling at me snapped me out of it, but I shouldn't have said what I said. I'm sorry."

You said sorry, Lalli thought, *But not that you won't do it again. Emil would have said it.*

"Lalli?" Tuuri started wringing her hands, "Are you okay?"

No. I'm not. "I'm fine."

Tuuri deflated a little. "Okay. I'll just... Go fix the tank," she turned to leave when she abruptly backtracked, "Oh, did you and Reynir meet in the Dreamscape? How did it go?"

"We didn't," Lalli told her, "He couldn't fall asleep afterwards."

"Ah," Tuuri grimaced, "Well... Both of you try to get some rest today then." She looked like she wanted to say something else, then just gave up. She left a second after.

Lalli knew there was really no point in getting mad at Tuuri. If he ignored her she just let herself be ignored until he stopped, and in this situation they couldn't afford to fight anyway. Emil would have tried to play peacemaker, no matter how long it took, but Emil-

There he went, thinking about Emil again. Had he ever actually stopped?

...well he wasn't going to find an answer *here* .

Lalli got up from his seat and went out back, into the storage compartment. Reynir was up, looking about as exhausted as Lalli felt. He greeted Lalli through a yawn then went out, muttering something about Mikkel and presumably breakfast.

Lalli sat on his bedspread, pulled the blanket over his head, curled up and watched.

And waited.

Around lunchtime, Tuuri was elbow deep in the guts of the tank when Mikkel pulled her away.

"I know you are committed to your job, but don't think I'm letting you prioritise it over your own health," he told her and put a bowl of porridge into her hands. He took another bowl and went off with it to the back of the tank, presumably to give the same speech to Lalli.

Tuuri ate her share sullenly, not tasting anything. Which, considering what she was eating, was probably a good thing.

"Ugh, more of this slop," Sigrun was looking at a piece of carrot on her spoon like it had personally offended her entire family tree, "Hey Puffy, how long do you think it will take you to get the tank moving again?"

Tuuri winced. "...I don't know, but it's not looking good."

"Give me an estimate. Another day or so?"

"More than that," Tuuri admitted guiltily, "The cables that troll broke are all connected again, this time correctly, but the engine needs work as well," she bit her lip, refusing to believe it wouldn't work at all, "Three days, if everything goes well."

Sigrun didn't look happy. "That's two days more than I want to spend here with both of my fighters out of commission, but I guess we have no choice. The tank's the only reliable shelter we got, and that's assuming those ghosts don't come back."

"I *will* get it going, I promise!" Tuuri swore earnestly, "Just give some time!"

"I'm not doubting you, kid, but time isn't exactly on our side," Sigrun said, "We can't afford to miss that boat. If we're not there when it comes around, it's not going to wait for us."

Tuuri knew that. She knew that she couldn't afford to fail.

"But, anyway, that's not what I meant," Sigrun continued, "We were already low on food when we started this trip, at some point we're going to start running out. If we're staying here anyway, we need to find a way to replenish our supplies. I heard running water over to the East," she pointed in the direction of the forest, "If we're lucky, it's a river that's got fish we can catch. Failing that, Twigs is

going to have to part with his sleeping beauty for a while and go hunting with me. Does he know how to hunt anything other than squirrels?”

Tuuri’s face twisted a little at the reminder of the first squirrel she ate on this expedition. At least Mikkel now insisted on Lalli skinning them first before dropping them into the soup. “He can. He just... finds squirrels the most fun to catch.”

Sigrun snorted at that. “Your cousin’s an overgrown cat, I swear. No wonder Pretty Boy likes him so much. He’s the biggest cat person I’ve ever met.”

Tuuri... didn’t really know how to feel about that. Both about Emil ‘liking’ her cousin and Lalli being an overgrown cat. Sigrun wasn’t wrong about either of those, just... Tuuri didn’t really have the mental faculties left to focus on personal feelings amidst all the *other* things currently on her mind.

Not the least that Emil was currently in a coma and both Lalli and Reynir were eyeing him the same way she looked at the tank’s engine when she wasn’t sure if it was going to explode in her face.

And speaking of the mage-

“Hey, Tuuri?” Reynir sat next to her with his share of lunch, “Do you mind if I take some of your report papers? Blank ones, I mean.”

“Um,” Tuuri reviewed the inventory in her head, “Sure, I can part with some. Not like I have a lot of reports left to write at this point, anyway. Why do you need them?”

“Aaaaah,” Reynir looked uncomfortable, “Well, Lalli asked me to make a rune that would chase away the ghosts, but without bursting into fire. Er, you know, in case they come back. And, well, I don’t really know what I’m doing very well so there will be some trial and error. So we need as much paper as you can spare.”

“How are you going to test it? I thought you said the ghosts were gone.” Tuuri frowned. She was starting to think Reynir was keeping something from her, “Do you know where they went?”

“...we have a feeling,” Reynir squirmed, whether in discomfort or guilt, Tuuri couldn’t discern.

He was definitely keeping something from her, from the entire team. Him and Lalli both were.

Well. Whatever it was, at least it seemed they were doing something about it. And besides, she wasn’t exactly in any position to help, since she wasn’t a mage.

She was just a non-immune mechanic and a translator. There was only one thing she *could* do.

“Sure,” Tuuri nodded, “Take as much as you need.”

It was like she told Lalli: he had a job to do, and he couldn’t afford to fail. The same went for her.

The same went for all of them.

Reynir sat at Tuuri’s work desk and tried with all of his might to recall what old aunty Helga, the only Icelandic mage he knew, had tried to teach him whenever he was sent to help her around the farm. And even if Reynir didn’t have the remembering capacity of a squirrel sometimes, most of those memories were about her complaining about something. Usually complaining about everything.

In short, her lessons weren't helping Reynir very much. The one working rune he did manage to design, he made mostly on intuition, and he hadn't exactly intended to make it *explode*. Maybe if he had discovered he was a mage earlier, and had gone to school for it he could have made something that worked properly, and even that was a big 'maybe'.

As it was, Reynir was about two seconds from banging his head against Tuuri's typewriter. Lalli looming over his shoulder was pretty much the only thing keeping him sitting in the chair.

"Here," he finally sighed and handed Lalli the sheaf of papers, "I don't know what to try anymore."

Lalli didn't give any indication that he understood, just took the papers and went out. Reynir stretched thoroughly before he followed. If he hadn't found a solution he wouldn't put it past Lalli to herd him back to the desk and keep trying until bedtime.

Back in the storage compartment, Lalli had left the newest stack of runes at the entrance and was cautiously approaching Emil with each one, one ear turned towards him. Reynir took over the job of handing each new rune to him and accepting the failed ones, wincing a little at the stick figure he drew at some point.

Nothing. Another hour of trying and a good chunk of Tuuri's paper later, they were left with no solution. There was only one rune that sort of worked, but it just made Emil look like he was having nightmares again without the change in the ghost whispers.

Reynir sighed, which immediately turned into a yawn. A glance outside confirmed that the sun had started dropping behind the horizon.

"Lalli," he drew the other mage's attention, then mimed sleeping followed by pointing a finger first to his and then Lalli's head.

Lalli still looked frustrated and sort of like he wanted to kick Reynir's butt back to the work desk, but he nodded tersely and didn't bite Reynir's heels. Reynir was almost pathetically grateful for the break.

Reynir shed his boots and pretty much collapsed next to Emil. He was *exhausted*. He'd barely gotten a wink of sleep last night, and coming up with entirely new runes turned out to be more tiring than shearing every single sheep on the farm by himself. A giant could probably attack their camp tonight and Reynir would die peacefully in his sleep.

He should have knocked on wood the moment that thought crossed his mind.

When he heard whimpering he thought Dog had come to find him. But Dog sounded quiet yet urgent, trying to tell him something. Reynir strained his ears to try and figure out what Dog was saying, but all he could pick out were tiny, frightened warnings of 'fire'.

The illusion shattered when Emil started screaming again.

Reynir jumped a meter in the air as he woke up. Next to him, Emil's spine was almost completely off his bed, like something was lifting him into the air in the most painful way possible. Lalli was on his knees next to him, once again trying to keep Emil's hands from tearing his hair out.

It's happening again.

This time, Reynir was already running when Mikkell opened the door.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

And *this* is the point where the insomnia started hitting in the heavyweight category. The chapter looks normal NOW, but it sure didn't look that way five hours ago. I'm cleaning them up as I go but at some point I think I'll be better off just rewriting entire chapters.

Reynir did fall asleep eventually. The human body cannot fight the urge to rest forever, no matter how much it may try.

Reynir's body gave up the fight about two hours after the screaming stopped.

"Try and get some sleep," Mikkell had said, collecting the wet towels, "If you like, we can switch beds."

"No," Reynir had refused, "I... I think it's better me and Lalli stay here."

Mikkell had looked at him strangely, but didn't press the issue. He dried Emil's thankfully cool body off and dressed him with the same efficiency as he did yesterday. Lalli came in the moment he left, settled down on the cot and went to sleep with a stubborn look on his face, like he could will himself to fall asleep though sheer single-mindedness.

Reynir almost dreaded finding Lalli. But he dreaded waking up without going to find him more, so he got up from his boat and went towards Lalli's area.

Lalli was already waiting for him on the rocks right outside his swamp. "What took you so long?"

"Sorry," Reynir said, "I came as soon as I fell asleep."

Lalli looked... Not mollified at that, but understanding. "Can you find Onni?"

"Um, yeah," Reynir pointed in the direction he could feel Onni's spirit residing, "He's that way."

"Then go," Lalli ordered.

So Reynir walked, Lalli following in his footsteps. Reynir wondered where Dog was. Usually he would be waiting for Reynir by the boat, even if he didn't plan on following him around.

Onni's area was just up ahead, and when they reached the rocks outside Lalli shot past him and into the forest. Reynir had to run to keep up with him, grateful that the forest floor was at least easier to walk on than Lalli's swamp.

"Onni," he found Lalli talking to a sleeping owl, "We need help."

"What is it?" the owl asked in Onni's voice, startling Reynir, "Are you hurt? Is Tuuri?"

“We’re fine,” Lalli told him quickly, “But Emil isn’t. Those ghosts that were chasing us, Kokko didn’t destroy them.”

“Of course she didn’t. She can’t,” Onni admonished him, “Haven’t you listened to a word of what Grandma said? Spirits can’t be destroyed, only guided-”

“They’re in Emil’s head!” Lalli yelled over Onni, “Emil won’t wake up, and I can hear them talking whenever I’m close to him,” he looked at Onni beseechingly, “What do I do, Onni?”

Poor Onni looked so bewildered and frightened that his feathers had fluffed up to twice his size. “The ghosts that were chasing you are now... *possessing him?* And he’s still *alive?*” Onni looked between them like they might drop dead any second, “Listen to me, this is important: have either of you looked him in the eyes?”

It struck Reynir as an odd question. “Well, no, he’s been asleep-”

“No,” Lalli was more insistent.

Onni relaxed a fraction. “Good. Then you still have time to kill him safely.”

“We have *what?!*” Reynir jumped. He couldn’t have heard that correctly-

“NO!!!” Lalli roared, “I won’t! I refuse!”

“Lalli, you *know* what this means!”

“*He is not a Kade!*”

“Then he is a part of one!” Onni yelled back, then visibly collected himself, “Lalli, I’m sorry. But you can’t let him go just because he’s your friend. That’s exactly how grandma was taken.”

Lalli looked heartbrokenly stricken. Reynir had had enough.

“No!” he poked a finger into Onni’s overly fluffy chest, “We are not doing anything, much less *killing* our *friend*, without a damn good explanation! Now tell me what a ‘Kade’ is and why do you think Emil is one, before I start plucking you like a chicken!”

Onni was so taken aback he was about a centimeter away from falling off his branch. Lalli looked like Kitty did whenever she sensed a troll in the vicinity.

Reynir didn’t budge from his position until Onni finally collected himself and sighed.

“I think Icelandic mages have nothing similar to it,” Onni began, “At least, I’ve never heard what happens to one of your own when they get infected. But when a Finnish mage is turned, they sometimes become a troll that is, for lack of a better word, able to infect the soul as well as the body of others. And when a Kade finds another mage and infects them, the mage is... *absorbed* into the Kade, similar to how several trolls merge to become a Giant. All that’s needed for an infection to happen is eye contact.”

“Okay,” Reynir nodded, “I understand they’re dangerous, but what makes you think Emil is one? He’s not infected, and he’s not even a mage.”

“How would you know?” Onni asked mockingly, “You didn’t know *you* were a mage until recently, and I got the impression you aren’t a particularly weak one. Your friend is Swedish, isn’t he? They

don't even believe in magic. If he is weak enough to be unable to see spirits, he might have spent his entire life believing he is entirely unmagical, had this possession not happened."

Reynir didn't have an answer to that. And neither did Lalli, it seemed.

"But," Reynir hesitated, "He's immune. He can't be infected."

"Not in body," Lalli said quietly, "Grandma was immune too. She was taken anyway."

"By another Kade?" Reynir asked. Lalli nodded. He turned to Onni, who at least had the grace to look apologetic.

"We saw what happens when a Kade gets involved first hand. Take our word for it: the kindest thing you can do for him is kill him while he is asleep, before his transformation is complete."

Lalli wrapped his hands around himself and turned his face away.

"No!" Reynir shook his head, desperation creeping into his voice, "We can't just- We can't! Not until we've exhausted our options!"

"And what other options are there?" Onni asked with the last threads of his patience, "Tell me, Icelandic mage. These are your gods. What *options* have they given you?"

The gods. Reynir had almost forgotten. "What about the Pastor lady?"

"Who?" Lalli's head shot up.

"She's a priestess of the Old World temple," Reynir hurried to explain, "I've actually been meaning to ask you, I've been trying to find her! I saw her temple in my dream, and I talked to her! She said it was her duty while she was alive to guide lost souls to the afterlife, and that if we brought the ghosts to her she would be able to do the same for them!"

"Why didn't you tell us sooner?!"

"I forgot!" Lalli looked like he was going to attack him when he said that, "When I found her you weren't in your area so I went to Onni, but he said he didn't know where to find her, and then everything happened all at once and it... kinda slipped my mind."

"You met this priestess?" Lalli turned to Onni, eyes full of hope.

Onni sighed. "I have. She seemed... remarkably aware for a spirit that had been on Earth since the Old World fell apart. But she didn't strike me as powerful enough to actually help you," he turned to Reynir with one feathery eyebrow raised, "And, as I recall, you still don't know where she actually *is*."

"Well, not in the real world," Reynir admitted, "But I can find her temple in the dream world, and I thought, Lalli is a scout, if I take him with me maybe he will find a way to lead us there."

"I...", Lalli hesitated, "Maybe. Are you sure she will be able to help Emil?"

"I think she will," Reynir was almost bouncing on his toes, "I've been shown the temple in my visions multiple times! All we have to do is bring Emil to her, and she can get the ghosts out of his head! And- And we don't have to kill anyone! Emil might even get better afterwards!"

Lalli looked stubborn and resolute once more. Onni took one look at his face and put his wing over his head.

“Fine. I clearly can’t stop you. But do try not to do anything stupid.”

“Take me to her,” Lalli ordered, and this time Reynir was more than happy to comply.

They left Onni’s area at a sprint. Reynir paused at the rocks right outside it to feel out where the temple was, then continued running as fast as his dream legs could carry him.

The light of the strange temple shimmered like a strange painting over the dark water, Reynir couldn’t have missed it if he was blind. He hopped over the threshold and inside, Lalli following so fast he crashed into him.

“This is it,” Reynir grinned, “This is the temple.”

“It’s weird,” Lalli scrunched his nose in confusion and not a bit of distaste, “A temple made of painted glass and cold wood. Your gods actually like this?”

Reynir blinked at him. “Kinda, but most temples in Iceland are different from this. But I thought Onni said you have temples like this as well? From the Old World, I mean. There are a few like this back home, it’s just that nobody lives in them anymore.”

Lalli looked at Reynir like he’d started sprouting another head. Reynir self-consciously patted his shoulders to check. Nope, still just one.

“You wanna look around?” Reynir offered awkwardly, “Maybe you will find something that will help you lead us to it? I’ll go look for the Pastor Lady. She’s usually here.”

Lalli nodded and hared off to root around. Reynir stood in place for a moment, trying to get a feel for where the Pastor might be.

What he sensed was... weird, to borrow Lalli’s word for it. Reynir *could* feel her presence, most strongly coming from a room a little ways away from the altar, but she did not respond to his knocking. Curious, he opened the door to peer inside, but the small room was empty. There was only a little tea table with a wooden bed.

“I guess she’s not asleep yet,” Reynir shrugged, “Huh. Didn’t know ghosts still had sleep schedules.”

Oh well. Maybe she was an early riser. Their dreams had overlapped before, but at this point it was probably closer to morning in the real world. He and Lalli fell asleep kinda late, and then spent some time in Onni’s forest.

“Where is the priestess?” Lalli asked right behind him, startling Reynir out of his wits.

“DON’T DO THAT!!!” Reynir yelled, hand over his heart.

Lalli didn’t look impressed. “Where is the priestess?”

“I guess we just missed her,” Reynir shrugged, blood pressure slowly falling to acceptable levels, “She’s usually here, but sometimes I can’t find her in the temple.”

“She’s not bound to it?” Lalli didn’t look happy with that, “Wandering spirits are far more unstable than bound ones.”

“No, she said she is bound to the temple,” Reynir said, trying to remember her words, “But... She did say she could leave when she wished. But she knew she still had a purpose to fulfill, and she was here waiting for it to come. Maybe she can leave the temple but not far? Or she is not sleeping.”

“Mrr,” Lalli looked at Reynir like he was an idiot again, then seemingly accepted it, “How big is this temple? Are you sure what you see in the Dreamscape is all of it?”

“I don’t know,” Reynir thought about it, “I... think it is. How much do you see from the outside?”

Instead of answering, Lalli led him outside. He pointed at the edge of the area, which faded into the dark sea only a few meters outside the temple walls.

“It’s just this temple and the path,” Lalli told him, “But not much area around it.”

“Did you find some road signs leading here?”

“No,” Lalli muttered, “Nothing. Just this temple.”

“I guess that’s what her, er, area is?” Reynir tilted his head. It was tall, with an uneven cross on top of the roof. “And I think this is what it looked like back in the Old World. It’s probably changed in the years it’s been abandoned.”

“Then how are you sure it’s not just in ruins by now?”

“The Pastor Lady is still here,” Reynir pointed out.

“She could be haunting the ruins,” Lalli speculated, “But the temple looks good. Solid. Maybe it’s still standing.”

“So you think you can find it?”

“Mrr,” Lalli grumbled, “If you found it in the Dreamscape, it has to be close. Tuuri can find it on a map, and I can scout it. Yes.”

“*Yes!!!*” Reynir jumped in the air with pure jubilation. If Lalli hadn’t jumped as far out of the way as he could he would have probably gotten hugged to death.

Chapter 6

Reynir and Lalli were still asleep.

Mikkel calmly stored the cooling remnants of the breakfast porridge and started in on the laundry. It had been raining this morning and everyone who had ventured outside was once again covered in mud. Luckily for Mikkel's soap supplies, that did not include their mages.

It was, however, the only silver lining he had managed to find so far.

Sigrun and Tuuri weren't worried when he brought it up with them, even going as far as to forbid him from waking them up. When Mikkel expressed concerns about their health, he had gotten a lengthy lecture about how mages, both Icelandic and Finnish, could traverse dreams to communicate over large distances. Even the real world language barriers did not apply. Tuuri had been sure they were in the process of asking her brother for help, and waking them up could interrupt an important conversation.

Mikkel considered what they were saying carefully. "When you said Reynir had contacted Onni right before we were attacked, is this what you meant?"

"Well, yes," Tuuri blinked at him, "How else would he have done it? Reynir doesn't even know how to adjust to the hailing frequency on the radio."

How else indeed? With that new information to mull over, Mikkel washed their dishes, put away Lalli and Reynir's portion and went on with his duties. Tuuri had returned to cursing the engine in Finnish and Sigrun had taken Kitty with her to do another perimeter check.

She'd taken to doing them twice a day, and each time she returned with nothing to report but eerie silence, which meant she got more and more uneasy. Frankly, Mikkel was starting to agree. The weather was getting warmer, the Silent World should have been slowly waking up, and not just trolls. Birds, small immune rodents, even deer. They should have encountered *some* sort of life by now.

But there was nothing. Never before had Mikkel thought the Silent World so aptly named.

Sigrun had started taking Kitty, thinking maybe the trolls were simply refusing to come out of hiding when she walked by. But on the last trip, Sigrun had returned with Kitty fast asleep in her arms, her rifle cold over her shoulder.

"I don't like this," she'd told Mikkel as he'd been sorting through their book collection, "I can understand why trolls and animals are avoiding this area, but I went scouting pretty far up ahead, and I still found nothing."

"Maybe there simply *are* no other trolls in the area," Mikkel guessed, "Maybe they were all part of the original horde that attacked us."

"I doubt it. Any given area always has at least another third as many trolls as you think there are," Sigrun imparted some of her hunting wisdom, "Maybe if we'd been keeping quiet and only moved during the day, this level of activity would be normal. But we haven't been doing either of those, and still nothing! Trolls all the way over in Copenhagen should have heard us at least twice now, but nothing came. Hell, I'm starting to think the screaming is scaring them off instead of drawing them here!"

“Well it has been pretty loud,” Mikkell said placidly.

“Do you think it will continue?” Sigrun asked uneasily.

Mikkell didn’t bother sugarcoating it. “It’s extremely likely. It has started twice now at almost the same time and lasted the exact same amount of time, with the exact same symptoms. We might have to accept that this will be a regular occurrence until Emil wakes up.”

If he wakes up, Mikkell didn’t say. Maybe he was sugarcoating it a little.

“Any new ideas what’s causing it?” Sigrun asked without much hope.

“Unfortunately, no. I’ve radioed the base and they reported that the elder Hotakainen’s condition has not changed. They have a doctor coming to check on him once a day, and other than exhaustion everything seems normal.”

“So the one theory we did have has been wrong,” Sigrun sighed and sat next to him, absently petting Kitty when she jumped into her lap, “We’re back to square zero and all we did was a waste of time.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Mikkell lowered his book, “Now we know what *isn’t* wrong with him, which narrows down our options. It means we’re closer to the real answer than when we started, and therefore closer to finding a solution.”

Sigrun opened her mouth to argue, but was almost immediately interrupted by Reynir and Lalli bursting in through the entrance in a rush of excited babble. Well, excited babble on Reynir’s part and urgent orders on Lalli’s.

“Slow down,” Mikkell forced them to sit down before they got any further, then turned to Reynir, “Now, what did you want to tell us?”

“We think we found a way to save Emil!”

“Emil?” Sigrun stood up anxiously, “What’s he talking about, Mikkell? What happened to Emil? Has he gotten worse?”

“On the contrary,” Mikkell smiled, just a little bit smug, “It seems all that sleeping paid off. They’re saying they’ve found a way to help him.”

The first bit of good news in the last two days had Sigrun smiling like the sun had come out. It made Mikkell smile in turn.

“Now then,” Mikkell turned back to Reynir, the only mage he could understand, “How, and what can we do to help?”

What followed was a long and roundabout explanation of a lot of things Mikkell and Sigrun had been wondering about. Sigrun was very much *not happy* to find out her right-hand warrior was in a coma because he was *possessed*, but she was mollified that there was a relatively simple solution to the problem.

“So we need to find this temple, and this spirit priestess is going to help him?” Sigrun was grinning, “Sounds doable, especially with Twigs willing to part with his sleeping beauty to go scouting again. Puffy, you think you can find it on a map?”

Tuuri, who had joined them at some point, nodded enthusiastically. "I'll do my best. This area can't have that many temples, and if Reynir could walk to it in a dream then it can't be that far. *Lalli, tule auttamaan minua.*"

She switched to Finnish, and she and Lalli left to go rooting through the expedition maps. Before Reynir could join them, Mikkel held him back.

"Are you certain this 'priestess' you found is who she says she is?" Mikkel asked him doubtfully, "We haven't had much luck with spirits as of late, who is to say she isn't like them?"

"But I talked to her," Reynir protested, "She sounds nothing like the other ghosts. They're all sad, and lonely, and scared, and- And she's good, I'm sure of it. Onni was, too."

Mikkel was still sceptical. "Did you at least ask which god she served?"

"Um, no," Reynir shrugged, "But she said something about a 'heavenly father', so I guess Odin?"

Mikkel raised an eyebrow. "And what did her temple look like?"

"Uh, like a stone house with painted windows," Reynir said, "And on top of the roof was like a 't' sign, like this," he crossed his index fingers to show Mikkel what he meant.

And Mikkel... Laughed. There was really no other possible reaction. "It's not a temple to Odin."

"Oh? Did she mean Yimmir then?"

"No, no," Mikkel patted Reynir on the shoulder, trying to keep his smile from turning into a smirk, "Though you are perhaps closer with that guess. No, it's a temple of a god that had once reigned over much of the Old World. Their name was lost to time even before the Old World ended, so they called them the 'Heavenly Father'. The temple in question is called a Church."

"Wow!" Reynir looked fascinated, "How do you know so much about it?"

"My family still keeps one of the Old World books called a Bible," Mikkel explained, "It was said to have been written by the prophets of this god, a long time ago. But nobody believes in him anymore, of course. After all, the world as our ancestors knew it ended on his watch."

"Oh," Reynir looked worried, "I didn't think to ask if she was still in contact with her god. And Onni did say she didn't seem that powerful. What if she's right and she won't be able to help Emil?"

"I didn't say she needed help from her god to cure Emil," Mikkel pointed out, "After all, you are a mage of substantial power, and yet you've probably said all of one prayer in your life, haven't you?"

Reynir positively squirmed with embarrassment. "Pretty much."

"And you still have magic. Why would the same not apply to this pastor? She has weathered over ninety years on her own, it stands to reason that, if she can help Emil at all, she can do it on her own as well."

Reynir did seem to feel a bit better after that, if a bit conflicted. Mikkel considered his job here done.

He had resigned himself to the existence of magic and ghosts. He would have been a fool not to, at this point. Gods, on the other hand, he remained sceptical of. If they had ever existed, they had probably given humanity whatever gifts they could and then left for greener pastures.

And if they had stayed... They obviously weren't very worthy gods, to rule a world as wretched as this one.

Looking for ancient temples - churches, as Mikkel had called them - took up almost the entire rest of the day. Sigrun decided not to point it out, though. The discovery their little mages made led to a nice boost in morale, which was sorely needed. They still had at least three days before they would absolutely have to pack up and start trekking, and this area remained safe, for one reason or another.

"Okay," Puffy spread the maps all over Mikkel's bunk, the only large and dry flat area they could all fit, "I have some good news and some bad news."

"Good news first," Sigrun ordered.

"Good news is: I've found several likely candidates for the church Lalli described, and at least four of them are close enough to our route that we could check them out without making a detour."

"That's great news," Sigrun grinned, "And the bad news?"

Tuuri sighed. "This Old World god was very popular. Lalli and Reynir helped me mark the potential area where the church *could be*, based on the distance we crossed since Reynir started seeing it, and," she gestured to the maps in defeat, "We have nowhere near enough time to check them all out."

Sigrun could see what she meant. Tuuri had marked the potential areas in red ink, and there were at least ten circles on just the first map Sigrun saw.

"So it's not a problem of finding the temple, but finding the right one," Sigrun frowned.

"Essentially," Tuuri shuffled the maps around, then pointed at two circles, "Lalli already went out to check these two. If we're lucky, it's one of them. If not, he will probably be back around morning tomorrow."

"That's a lot of distance to run in a night and a half. You sure he can do it?"

"Mikkel gave him water and rations, and Reynir said he could check in on him during the night," Tuuri avoided the question. Meant she wasn't entirely sure either.

"Well, he's gone already," Sigrun pushed away from the seat with the maps, "Nothing we can do now except wait for him. If he runs into trouble he's smart enough to know to backtrack. I'm not sure how far the safe area stretches, but he should be fine for at least two kilometers."

Puffy didn't look very consoled, but it was the best Sigrun could do in this situation. She patted Puffy's back the same way she would Twigs, then left to eat some sludge Mikkel euphemistically called 'lunch'.

Hopefully Twigs would bring back more squirrels.

The rest of the day was less eventful. Sigrun took Mikkel fishing while Puffy tried to fix the engine and Braidy... She didn't know, tried to consult the gods or something? Dammit, she really needed to teach that kid to invoke gods properly. At this point even Emil knew how to pray like a proper viking, whether he liked it or not, she couldn't let their one Icelandic mage embarrass himself even further!

"I don't think you are going to attract fish by bouncing the pole," Mikkel remarked, the bastard.

“Ugh,” Sigrun glared at her pole, which was indeed bouncing along with her leg, “I can’t believe I managed to forget how much I hate fishing.”

“Somehow I am not surprised you would hate the one hunting activity that requires standing still and staying silent,” Mikkel lifted his own pole, and sure enough, another fish was dangling from it. He removed it expertly and let it go in the bucket with four others like it. That made Mikkel’s five to Sigrun’s zero. She was *this close* to just using the fishing pole as a spear to even their score when Mikkel spoke again.

“The sun is close to setting. This is enough for dinner, and I want to be ready before Emil starts acting up again.”

It shut her up faster than entering a troll infested building would have. She wrapped up their poles while Mikkel carried the bucket to the portable stove. Puffy was still at the engine, looking like she was three seconds away from beating it into submission.

“How’s it going?” Sigrun dared to ask.

Puffy growled like a feral animal, so she wisely decided to take her business elsewhere.

Dinner was some kind of fish chowder, and definitely tastier than the usual slop. Which honestly wasn’t saying much, but considering what they’d been eating so far it was practically delicacy.

“Sigrun,” Mikkel called her when they were finished, “I need your help.”

“Name it.”

“When Emil’s- *episode*, starts up again I need you to help me restrain him,” Mikkel said calmly, “From what I’ve seen so far, I think it would be best to tie his hands and legs to the piping in storage.”

“What? No!” Sigrun was appalled, “Why would we do that? Did he try and attack you or something?”

“No, I would have managed if that was the case,” Mikkel said, still putting away the dishes like they were having a conversation about the weather, “Rather, when he starts acting up he tries to harm himself. Primarily tear his hair out and claw at his face. Lalli usually holds him down for me while I cool him off, but Tuuri has already said he would not be here tonight.”

Sigrun said nothing. What the Hell was there to even say? She knew she would have to do it, that it was for Emil’s own good, and if Twigs could stand to see his sleeping beauty writhing in pain while he had to hold him down, then so could she.

Didn’t mean she liked it one bit.

There were a lot of things she’d had to do on this expedition that she didn’t like. And to think, this was supposed to be a *vacation*.

Somewhere in Asgard, the gods were laughing at her.

“Sigrun?” Mikkel startled her from her thoughts, “If it makes you that uncomfortable, I can-”

“No,” Sigrun said firmly, “I’ll do it.”

Mikkel dared to look sceptical. Sigrun turned on him, teeth bared, “Just because I don’t like it, doesn’t mean I’m going to shirk my responsibilities! When I do, I’ll damn well court martial *myself* for

dereliction of duty!”

“Big words, coming from you,” Mikkell smirked, the bastard, “But admirable, nevertheless.”

Sigrun was going to strangle him at some point on this expedition, she knew it.

But then Mikkell brought out rope and started padding Emil’s wrists and ankles with gauze and bed foam, and all of Sigrun’s thoughts of revenge flew out the window to be replaced by a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach.

The sun had started to set. Braidy had brought the basin with cold water and towels, looking like Sigrun felt. He eyed the restraints with an uncomfortable look on his face, but didn’t say anything. Tuuri had done what Sigrun wanted to do, which was wait next to the radar with a shotgun on her lap. If their luck ran out and some grossling did come to see what all the noise was about, she was to shoot first and come get them later.

Sigrun wasn’t so lucky, so she ended up sitting on her heels with Emil’s head on her lap. Mikkell was worried that he might try to bang his head against the floor, so Sigrun’s job was to make sure he didn’t give himself a concussion.

It also meant she was going to get a front-row seat to his anguished screaming. Gods, she could not put into words just how much she wanted to be anywhere other than here.

But this was her right-hand warrior. The Little Viking she was training to be great like her one day. She refused to fail him when he needed her the most. When the team needed her to do her best. There was really nothing else to do.

Emil’s temperature was slowly rising, though he wasn’t stirring just yet. When Sigrun informed Mikkell of it they quickly undressed him and slipped the ropes over his wrists and ankles. That done, Mikkell looked at his watch and noted down the time of the changes. To be better prepared the next time, he’d said.

Braidy was fiddling with one of the towels, squinting in Emil’s direction like he was seeing something she couldn’t. He probably was. Sigrun didn’t know if she wanted to know what.

All of those ghosts that were chasing them were now inhabiting the pretty head resting on her lap. She couldn’t really blame Emil for screaming his throat raw. She didn’t know how she would have handled all of those bloodthirsty spirits tearing her mind apart from the inside, but it probably wouldn’t have been pretty either.

There was also the question of what was going to be left when Braidy’s priestess got them out. If there was going to be anything left at all.

Emil’s temperature was rising. He looked like he was in pain. Mikkell noted that down too.

Less than a minute later, she wasn’t thinking anything at all, except how to keep Emil still while he screamed.

The trolls did not come that night either.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

This is where the Angst tag comes into play, so be warned.

Also, I've looked at the text I got from this point, and I think it's better I formally reclassify the rest of it as 'outline' and write proper chapters from scratch.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The high sun of the next day brought Lalli with it. Along with some disappointing news.

“He says the churches he found weren’t the right ones,” Tuuri translated her cousin’s news. It wasn’t surprising, really, but it did dash everyone’s hopes a bit.

“It was a long shot anyway,” Sigrun shrugged, “It’s more likely that we’ll find it going forward. If Braidys’s still seeing it, that means it’s somewhere in our future, right?”

Tuuri knew less about the abilities of Icelandic mages than she did about Finnish ones, so she repeated the question to Reynir. The Iclander in question thought about it for a moment, then announced that Sigrun was probably right.

It all returned to the fact that they needed the tank moving, and they needed it moving *soon*.

It should have been a motivating thought. It wasn’t. But being terrified of failure did throw Tuuri into her work nevertheless, it just came with an additional dose of insomnia.

That was on top of the usual insomnia caused by her teammate screaming every night.

So Tuuri worked and didn’t complain. At some point even Reynir and Lalli stopped coming to her for translations, managing either with crude drawings or waiting until they could meet in dreams. They’d informed her Onni was still asleep and regaining his energy, but was otherwise fine. That was the last they’d seen fit to bother her with.

Sigrun mostly left her alone as well. She sent Mikkel and Reynir fishing, and went hunting with Lalli. Since nothing had come into their camping area for several days now Tuuri was technically allowed to wander around as well, though she passed on the offer. Getting the tank working again was far more important.

The only person who really talked to her anymore was Mikkel, and that was mostly to force her to eat and rest. He usually offered a bit of pep talk along with food, but other than that he didn’t bother her either.

She worked. The team tried not to bother her. She tried not to lose hope. Emil screamed. The engine still wasn’t working.

She was losing hope. Mikkel and Sigrun were quietly talking about starting to pack up and walk. Tuuri was persistent that she just had to *get the damn engine to actually start gods dammit*, they

wouldn't have to walk just yet.

At that point even Reynir didn't entirely believe her anymore.

"The sun is starting to go down," Mikkell told her on the sixth evening, "Can you set up a perimeter guard while we prepare?"

"What's even the point?" Tuuri snarked as she slammed the hub down, "We're the only living things for kilometers. Lalli can't even find squirrels to hunt. We're just wasting accumulator power we can't afford to waste!" Tuuri kicked the tire like she could intimidate the tank into starting, "Maybe if the damned thing got the opportunity to cool down this *piece of shit would actually start!*"

Mikkell was entirely nonplussed at her outburst. Instead he looked thoughtful. "You know, you might be onto something."

"I am?" She was? She'd just been venting.

"Well you're the mechanic, so I wouldn't dare to assume I know more than you," Mikkell held his hands up, "But just the fact that you've suggested it as a likely solution speaks volumes."

"You think that will work?" Tuuri mulled it over a bit. Well, it was one of the few things left that she *hadn't* tried. At this point it might as well be what would get them moving. She was out of ideas anyway.

"It's worth a shot," Tuuri sighed, "But that means we can't turn on heating either."

"We're all sleeping in piles of three," Mikkell reminded her, "And if we end up having to walk we will all have to sleep in a tent without heating anyway. It seems like a worthwhile sacrifice."

Permission granted, Tuuri set up the radar rods but didn't turn them on. She rewired some stuff under the hub, closed it down and got into the driver's seat just as the screaming started.

She thought she was starting to get used to it. It didn't even seem so loud anymore. Either Emil didn't have the strength to scream anymore or she was going deaf. At this point, both of those were equally likely.

When it stopped, 26 minutes on the dot, Mikkell and Sigrun came into the sleeping room. Sigrun didn't even say anything, just clambered into her bunk and pulled a pillow over her head. Tuuri was pretty sure her ears were still ringing.

She didn't notice that the radar did not ping when she came in from storage. Mikkell probably didn't either. Tuuri followed them to bed, hesitantly standing in the entrance.

"I, uh, turned off the heating. We need to conserve power," she told Sigrun.

"Ugh, that's gonna suck. But good call, Puffy," Sigrun groaned and turned her back to the rest of them. And that was that.

They went to sleep, a little cold but too exhausted to care.

Nobody thought that it would be the very evening their luck ran out.

Lalli hadn't noticed something following him.

Reynir did not notice something coming closer.

Sigrun did not notice the radar was turned off.

Mikkel did not think to set up watch turns.

Nobody noticed their visitor.

Nobody except Emil.

Warmth. There was Warmth.

It clung to a little creature of fresh meat and clear eyes. They thought at first that the Warmth was coming from it, but it wasn't. It enveloped it like a fur coat, kept it warm from the cold of the world, but it wasn't the one it belonged to.

They wanted that Warmth as much as they feared it. The sun was warm too, but it burned if they got too close. This Warmth felt similar, but softer. Like fire. But fire still burned if you got too close.

*But they were so, so cold, and so alone. They had memories of Others, like them, and they weren't so lonely, but they were gone gone **gone**-*

They followed, but did not get too close.

They followed, and waited. And then there were voices screaming FIRE FIRE FIRE but they did not burn. They calmed, and only Warmth remained.

They feared, but they approached. It was a great, strange beast, utterly metal and cold except for the souls cradled in its belly. And there was the Warmth, coming from the Warm One.

They came to the cold wire surrounding the metal creature, but did not dare cross. Memories they could no longer clearly recall, from Before, made them wary to cross, to touch the burning wire.

But the Warm One was inside, and they wanted to come. They wanted to Join them, even though they had never Joined anything else, even the creatures they used to run with. But there were Many with the Warm One, and there was Warmth for everyone.

They wanted to Join them, but they did not know how.

"Awwoooo," they mourned, they called. Would the Warm One accept someone as cold and small as them? They wanted that Warmth, they wanted so much to Join. Would they be enough?

Then the mouth of the metal beast opened, and the Warm One stepped out. They had clear eyes, but it was Them, and They carried the Warmth.

"We are cold," they said to the Warm One, with eyes glowing like the moon and golden fur the color of sun.

"Then come to us," the Warm One came closer to them, "Come and rest at the hearth, and you will no longer be cold and alone."

They approached cautiously, but the Warm One did not turn them away. They took their head in Their warm hands, and brought Their face closer, laid Their forehead to theirs, and-

And then there was Warmth.

Stupid, stupid, *stupid*.

Reynir hadn't come to take Lalli to the temple. He'd come to Lalli's area just long enough to ask, then left to look for his dog, which was something Icelanders had instead of Luontos. If Reynir's was missing, Lalli had to grudgingly respect him for functioning as well as he had the last few days.

So Lalli was left to seep in his area, which he sorely needed. He was rather disgruntled when something woke him up.

He was cold, not understanding why he woke up at all. He'd actually almost gotten used to sleeping in an open space. He still hated it, but he was exhausted enough that he fell asleep anyway.

He was exhausted enough that he couldn't wake up in time either.

There was something *weird* in the air. But there was *always* something weird in the air these days, with countless ghosts inhabiting the mind sleeping next to him. Lalli couldn't pinpoint it at first, until he turned to look at Emil and saw Reynir.

Saw the storage doors open.

"Emil!" he called, and he could see Emil outside, could see his hair shine in the moonlight, could see-

A wolf beast laid at Emil's feet, its head cradled in his arms. It was still and placid as if tame, and Emil held it like it was an uninfected puppy.

Lalli's heart was in his throat. No, no, he couldn't be, Onni couldn't be right, they'd been *so close*-

Emil turned around, and looked Lalli in the eye.

His eyes were glowing violet.

"Hi, Lalli," he greeted with a gentle smile, voice slightly hoarse, "Did I wake you up?"



He asked like this was an ordinary night and Lalli had just come back from scouting, like his eyes weren't *glowing* and he'd brought a wolf beast into their camp, like Reynir wasn't right behind Lalli and non-immune, like he was *still Emil-*

But he wasn't.

The Kade got up, the wolf beast still on the ground, and he was coming closer.

Lalli slapped a hand over his eyes and stumbled a step back. *Stupid, stupid, stupid*, Lalli screamed in his head, *You made the exact same mistake that got Grandma killed! That got the entire village killed! Now everyone here is dead and it's your fault!*

"Lalli?" the Kade was close, close enough to touch, "What's wrong?"

"Lalli?" Reynir's voice came from behind, then rose in pitch, "Emil? Þú ert vakandi!"

“Don’t look him in the eye!” Lalli yelled at the stupid, *stupid* Icelandic who didn’t understand Finnish and was *coming closer*.

Warm hands enveloped his, wrapped around his cold fingers that were covering his eyes. Emil had no right to be this warm on a cold winter night, didn’t have any right to be warm at all now that he was a Kade. But why in the world would Emil ever listen to reason and rules and how things should be?

“It’s okay, Lalli,” the Kade was saying softly, not moving Lalli’s hands away just yet. He knew he didn’t need to. “They’re all here with me, but they can’t come out. They can’t hurt you. You don’t have to be afraid.”

Such pretty lies. Did Emil lie like that all the time? Lalli wished he’d never known that, wished he didn’t understand what Emil was saying. He would have preferred to never understand a single word that came out of the Swede’s mouth rather than hear perfect Finnish spelling the most damning lies.

“Emil?” Reynir sounded bewildered, “Síðan hvenær talar þú íslensku?”

Lalli heard the doors of the tank opening, followed by footsteps.

No no no no no no, Lalli couldn’t let this happen, he had to get them away while he still had control of himself-

The Kade pried his fingers away from his face, and Lalli resisted but when it came to sheer muscle Emil was stronger than him. The Kade with Emil’s face looked so concerned for him Lalli could have cried.

“Reynir, what’s wrong?” the Kade asked, “Why won’t he look at me?”

Lalli could pinpoint the exact moment Reynir remembered what Onni told him, about how a Kade infects its victims. He gasped, took a step back, hopefully covered his eyes. Then ran past Lalli, yelling for their other teammates.

Good. Maybe they could still be saved.

“Lalli, why is Reynir screaming that I’m a troll?” the Kade asked, sounding simply confused, “I thought he knew I’m immune? And why does he think I suddenly know Icelandic?”

It was such an Emil thing to say, Lalli’s eyes watered against his will. Why did it have to sound so much like Emil? Wasn’t taking him enough? Wasn’t wearing his face like a *trophy* enough?

The Kade thumbed Lalli’s tears away gently, and Lalli was already damned, he looked the Kade in its stolen eyes and it was a miracle his thoughts were still his own. Looking twice wouldn’t make him any more damned than he already was, would it?

“There you are,” the Kade practically cooed when Lalli finally opened his eyes, “I was getting worried. If the wolf scared you, he’s dead now. Well, he’s here with the rest of the party,” the Kade tapped his temple lightly, “but its body is just an empty husk now. It can’t hurt anyone.”

“And you?” Lalli dared to ask, “Will you hurt us?”

The Kade looked taken aback. “What? Of course not! You’re my friends! Why in the world would I want to hurt you?”

He sounded so earnest. Like he actually meant it. And Lalli... Lalli let himself hope. Hope that whatever Emil was now, it wasn't a Kade. That it was still *Emil*, despite the different shape he came in now. Because behind the violet glow of Emil's eyes he was still looking at Lalli with such kindness and concern, the same look that Lalli fell in love with.

Buoyed by that desperate hope, and his heart so high in his throat he could feel himself choking on it, Lalli leaned forward, closing in on Emil's-

Sigrun screamed.

There was a gunshot.

Then darkness.

Chapter End Notes

"Emil! You're awake!"

"Emil? Since when do you speak Icelandic?" - Reynir.

If it's atrocious, I apologize, and blame google translate

THERE'S ART THERE'S ART!!! The beautiful work can be found [HERE](#) Made by the wonderful [koipalm](#) Give them love!

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Here you go lovelies, a nice long chapter for Halloween.

Warning for veeeeery thinly veiled metaphors for trauma and healing. Also mangling of Norse mythology.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Reynir had woken up straight into a nightmare.

He remembered Onni's words, that the only way to stay alive was to kill Emil in his sleep, before he became a monster.

They didn't listen, and now Lalli was gone. Emil held his face in his hands, had pried the fingers off Lalli's eyes, and suddenly started speaking Icelandic to Reynir. That was not Emil anymore.

Reynir ran. Ran so fast he collided with Mikkell, almost squishing Kitty between them.

Kitty was hissing. It felt like the last nail in a coffin.

"Reynir," Mikkell steadied him with one hand on his shoulder, "What happened?"

"Emil turned into a troll!" Reynir sobbed, "Onni warned us he was becoming a Kade but we didn't listen and now he's got *Lalli*, and I'm so so sorry-"

"Hva i helvete snakker han om?" Sigrun hefted her rifle higher with her good arm and went around Reynir.

"No, wait!" Reynir grabbed her arm, "Mikkell, help me! Emil went- *bad*. Onni said only a Kade can survive having so many souls in it, and they're dangerous! You can't look Emil in the eyes, or you'll be infected too!"

"Reynir, Emil is immune," Mikkell reminded him, like Reynir didn't already know that, "He can't be infected. Nevertheless, we'll go check it out, and you go wait with Tuuri in the tank."

"No, you don't understand-" he was cut off by Sigrun's startled curse and an echoing gunshot.

The world seemed to stop around Reynir. His breath caught, Kitty squirmed out of Mikkell's arms and into his, Sigrun was saying something, Mikkell was moving, but Reynir stood frozen to the spot. It was over, over, *over*, all because of Sigrun's one startled shot, and they were *dead*-

Emil's voice came, startled and a bit angry. *Swedish*.

Reynir turned around.

Emil and Sigrun were saying something to each other, something Reynir had no hope of picking out, her good arm thrown around Emil's shoulder. Mikkell was outright checking Emil over, and Lalli-

Lalli was in Emil's arms, face hidden in his shoulder and arms around his waist. Emil had one hand on the nape of Lalli's neck and the other around his back. To an unsuspecting observer, it looked like Emil was comforting him.

Now that his eyes were back to their usual blue, even Reynir could barely believe what he had seen.

But he saw. He knew. That wasn't Emil anymore. That wasn't Lalli anymore.

And he had no way to prove it.

Emil's throat hurt. And his head, but the throat was currently a priority.

Sigrun wanted him to *talk*. Like Emil had even half an idea what the hell was going on.

"Here," Mikkell handed him a steaming mug of something that smelled like tea, "I added syrup to it. It should make your throat feel better."

"Thanks," Emil accepted the metal cup and gently blew on it. He couldn't tell what it was exactly, but it probably either came from Mikkell's medical supplies, or it was some greenery Lalli found in the forest. Either way, it tasted amazing after eating nothing for days. Even Mikkell's stew, currently warming over the fire, smelled appetising right now.

"Alright, I don't usually say this, but I need you to start at the beginning," Sigrun told him, leaning forward with her elbows on her knees, "You've been out for five days now, and screaming yourself raw every night. You worried Twigs half to death! I think it's in everyone's best interest you spill every bean you got on this."

"Can I eat first?" Emil nodded towards the pot on the stove, "Food in the Dreamscape doesn't exactly carry over. At this point, even Mikkell's food is bound to taste good."

"Spoken like a truly starving man. Eat while you talk," was Sigrun's concession, "Take a break if you need to, but we need to start soon. As you can see," she waved a hand at the wolf beast's corpse, "our grace period has run out. Some of us need to go stand guard soon."

Emil rolled his eyes. "You didn't have to shoot it. It was already dead."

"Maybe, but it walked all the way over here, didn't it?" Sigrun raised an eyebrow, "Seriously, Blondie, we're dying over here. Tell us while the translators are still on duty."

"We'll translate while you eat," Mikkell said as he handed Emil a bowl of stew, "That way you can get some food in you while we talk. And it's better to eat slowly after fasting for five days."

Emil gratefully shoveled the stew into his mouth. Next to him, Lalli was looking at him with such focus Emil would have been an embarrassed mess had he the presence of mind to feel anything other than hungry.

Lalli hadn't really taken his eyes off Emil since he woke up. Well, since Emil managed to convince him he wasn't some kind of weird troll and that all the spirits inhabiting his mind were safely quarantined inside, whether they liked it or not.

Tuuri was next to him, about to translate what Emil was saying to Finnish. Reynir was next to Mikkell, who would serve in the same capacity. Unlike Lalli, though, Reynir had been avoiding Emil's eyes the entire evening. Probably still convinced Emil was a troll.

Eh, he'd get over it.

"Um, I guess it started during the battle," Emil took another sip of tea, "I honestly thought we weren't going to make it, and Sigrun said to pray to the gods to let us see tomorrow. And I didn't have any pride left to lose at that point, so... I prayed."

"To whom?" Sigrun asked, "And more importantly: how? Please tell me you at least remembered what I taught you and did a better job than Braidy here."

"Uh, I pretty much repeated what I heard you say when you prayed," Emil admitted, "But that's not what's interesting. Apparently, at least one god actually *listened*..."

"Granted."

With Emil still pressed to her chest, Nanny threw out one arm in a grand sweep. Amongst the flashes of pink lights Emil could hear screaming, cries of the ghosts that had attacked him, slowly going quieter, replaced by-

...meowing?

Emil dared to take a peek.

He didn't know how, but somehow he'd found himself in his old house, before the fire rendered it into nothing but ash. It looked like it always did in Emil's memories, the evening the fire had started, except for one thing.

Cats. Lots of them. Some young, some old, some very strangely deformed, and all of them transparent and glowing.

"Are they... the ghosts?" he asked his Nanny. She stroked his hair gently.

"Not really," she said, but it wasn't her voice. Her eyes were glowing pink when Emil looked up, "They are lost souls, ones who cannot pass over the river Gjoll. It's only supposed to be impassable one way, but the poison they took cut them off from entering Helheim as well, instead of just leaving. Gjengangere, I suppose you could call them."

That wasn't what Emil meant, but it was probably not an important question in the current situation. He squirmed out of Not-Nanny's arms and she let him. "What's going on? Who are you really?"

Not-Nanny smiled at him. "My, my, have you already forgotten? You are the one who asked me for help, and I couldn't just ignore one of my favorites when they finally renounce their heathen ways in a most splendid battle."

Heathen ways? She sounded like- Wait a minute...

"You-" Emil stuttered, not really believing what he was about to say, "-you're... Freya?"

"Indeed I am," she grinned widely, "And I'll forgive you this time, since it was your first prayer, but when you invoke your God you invoke only them," the grin did not seem so nice anymore, "Otherwise we get jealous."

"Right. Uh, got it," Emil still had no idea what was happening, "Am I dead then?"

"Of course not!" Freya waved a hand dismissively, "We still need to work on true faith, I see. That's alright, you'll get there."

"Um," Emil was still confused. One of the cats pawed at his ankles.

"You have asked to be able to see tomorrow," Freya continued, "You cannot do that if you're dead. Waking up will be something you have to do on your own, but you are still very much alive to do it."

"But," Emil struggled to find the words, "How am I here then?"

"You're dreaming," Freya said like it was obvious, "This is your area in the Dreamscape. The place where your soul goes when you fall asleep," she eyed the cats milling around with pursed lips, "Though, since you are not a mage, it lays below the Dreamsea. That might be a problem."

"It will?" Emil asked. The cat was getting more insistent, so Emil bent down to pick it up. It had three heads. Emil cradled it in his arms and started petting it anyways. It purred weird.

"They might be smaller and tamer as cats, but they cannot stay here forever," Freya pointed out, "But they cannot pass on, either. None of us, not I, not Hela nor Odin can take them like this, not when they can't pass over the river or through the gates."

"Oh," Emil understood exactly none of that. Well, he understood it was magic stuff, but that was about it. He'd ask Sigrun about it when he woke up. "So... What do I do with them?"

Freya looked at him strangely. Well, she was looking at the three-headed cat he was still petting, but Emil got the feeling he was included in her considerations as well.

"For now, nothing. Things can still go according to plan," Freya nodded decisively, then frowned in thought, "This is an unusual situation, to say the least. You are my creation, but you're a boy in both body and mind, so it would be against protocol for me to give you my power. I'm stretching the terms of our agreement as it is. And the Allfather will not be happy with me if I give you the duty he sent one of his own to fulfill."

"I understand all those words separately," Emil said blithely. Freya laughed so hard she startled some of the cats.

"Oh, you're a delight, my dear," she said, a huge grin still on her face, "Tell you what: I cannot make you a mage, but I can still give you a few useful tricks. So listen well: the boy with the red braid, his dog will find you. You must let it come in and lay before your hearth for three nights. When it is rested, you must let it out. It will show you how. Then you wait for the boy, and greet him warmly as well. When he trusts you, he will take you to the one who can open the gates of the Heavens. They will accept these souls for their own," her expression gentled, "Until then, keep them here, and keep them warm. They have known nothing but the cold for a long time."

Emil nodded. It wouldn't exactly be hard to get the fire in the stone fireplace going, and as long as Reynir's dog didn't antagonize the cats he had no problem with letting it stay here.

Wait. Fire. Emil turned to look out the window.

The wildfire that had taken Östersund was still outside, getting closer.

"Wait, and if I can't wake up?" Emil asked, "Is the fire going to reach the house?"

"It will," Freya nodded, "But it needs to. If you try to start the fire in the hearth, you will see why."

That seemed like an odd thing to say. Nevertheless, Emil had heard enough about the gods from Sigrun to know that it was probably in his best interest to listen to the one currently in his kitchen.

He took the matches in one of the drawers and knelt before the open fireplace. He had lit the fire in it a thousand times as a kid, fascinated with how the little lick of fire barely caught the dry branches at first and then devoured the thickest logs in a display of dancing flames. Nanny had used to shake her head at his antics and leave him to it, happy that he was at least occupied and that it was one less chore for her to do.

But now, in this dream, he could not produce a single spark.

“Do you see?” Freya knelt next to him, “You cannot make fire of your own until you’ve tamed the fire outside.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Emil protested, “I thought this was my dream!”

“It is,” Freya nodded, “And the fire outside is not the fire that destroyed your home, but your memory of it. You keep seeing it as something that happened to you, something you had no control over.”

“It’s a wildfire, or course I didn’t control it!”

“Not the real fire, no,” Freya raised an eyebrow at him. The expression reminded him of the one Sigrun made when she thought he was being particularly slow. “But the fire outside right now is a memory, like I’ve already told you. You did not fear the fire, even when it took everything from you, but you resented it. Don’t. Make it your own. Take it, and put it in your hearth. Then you will have tamed it, and changed it just as much as it has changed you. But if you leave it to rampage...”

She didn’t need to finish. If he didn’t learn to control it, the fire would keep burning him. It was the first thing they learned in Cleanser training. Apparently, it applied in the dream world as well.

“So, what? I just take the fire outside when it reaches the house and... carry it here?” he waved a hand at the empty fireplace.

“You make it sound easy,” Freya tucked a stray piece of his hair behind his ear, “It will not happen in one night. You cannot use anything but your own self to carry it. It will burn your hands. It will hurt, and it will keep hurting for as long as there is fire outside. But, in time, when you have transferred enough of it to your hearth, it will weaken, and burn less and less. One day, it may burn so low you don’t even notice it.”

“I don’t suppose I can ask for some fireproof gloves, do I?”

“It doesn’t work that way,” Freya smiled a bit sadly.

“Yeah, I guessed,” Emil sighed, “And the ghost cats? Will they get burned?”

“No. It may scare them, though,” her smile turned thoughtful, “And it is rather telling that you are worried about what will happen to them.”

“Well,” Emil eyed the three-headed one uncomfortably. It was trying to get his attention again, so he pulled it onto his lap. “I guess... I mean, you said they’ve been suffering for so long. I know they, uh, came in here uninvited and all, but I would be pretty starved for company too if I was alone for ninety years. And I don’t really mind them being here, they’re a lot nicer like this,” he petted the cat again, and its purring attracted another two kittens to Emil, “I don’t want them to suffer even more than they already have.”

For some reason, Freya looked... proud of him. It was an expression he'd been rather unused to seeing directed at him until Sigrun came along, and even then it wasn't exactly an everyday occurrence. Emil was too clumsy for it to be, even though he thought he was improving.

Freya cupped his cheek gently and turned his face to hers.

"Emil," she sounded solemn, "The next time you encounter one of the Draugr, one of the trolls, what will you do?"

"Uh, try to stay alive," Emil said, thinking that was a painfully obvious answer, "Put it out of his misery, if possible."

"And if I told you you could invite them in?" she nodded towards the ghost cats milling around, "Not all of them are ghosts, as you called them. Some are the trolls that got swept up in the battle. When I leave I can take them with me, but only the ones who are already here. If you encounter any more, would you bring them in?"

Emil was stumped. How the hell was he supposed to do that?

"They will feel the fire in your hearth," Freya explained without being asked, "And they will come to you, but will not harm you. If you bring them in, they will take the shape of cats and pass into the Afterlife through the hearth."

"Okay, but... Isn't that what mages do?" Emil was pretty sure that was what Lalli did with the dog beast, "Help souls pass into the Afterlife."

"You're thinking of the wrong mages. Mine and Odin's rarely have that ability, for it was not one we had thought to give them," Freya corrected him, "If a creature dies in battle, they are collected by Valkyries, but if they don't, they have to find their own way to Hel. In the case of these poor souls, they can't even do that. Someone needs to do it, needs to guide them," Freya took one of the ghost kittens from Emil and petted it, "There are few who could, and even fewer who would. You have proven to have a kind and open heart, and you are in the perfect position for it. This is not something I would ordinarily ask of a mere mortal, but I feel I need to ask anyway: will you be the Guide of abandoned souls?"

Freya looked so solemn and serious, like she was asking for some terrible hardship from Emil. Emil bit his cheek. It wouldn't hurt to ask, would it? "What would being a Guide mean?"

"There are many lost souls in this world, more than those who wander with clear eyes," Freya told him, still strangely serious, "In the old times, when they were fewer and mages were more, a Guide of lost souls wasn't needed. They would wander home eventually, we thought. But the times have changed. We need Guides of lost souls, but it is hard to pick them, even on the off chance they'd be willing."

"Why not?" Emil asked, "Is being a Guide... bad, somehow?"

"Not really," Freya sighed, "But it is far from a glorious purpose. It is hard and constant work, and you will not be recognised for it in your own Afterlife. Whether you go to Fólkwangr with me, or to Hela's realm, that will be decided upon your death alone. It is a lot done for others, but no reward for yourself."

Emil thought about it a little. "So... It's a lot like Aunt Siv's job."

Freya frowned, looking lost. Emil hurried to explain.

“Ah, my aunt Siv, she’s a doctor. She works with- Well, used to work, she quit to organise our expedition, for the government to develop a cure or a vaccine for the Rash. She’s been working on it for ten years, and has made almost no progress. I remember my father once asked her why she was doing it, since she hadn’t needed the money back then, and it was unlikely to make her famous. She said she did it because it had to be done, for the good of humanity. Even if she did not find the cure, or it was found long after her death, whoever does find it will have an easier time if they didn’t have to start from scratch,” Emil tilted his head in thought. The three-headed cat pawed at his chin. “So the work she was doing was important, and that was the only reason she needed to do it, even if she won’t be awarded for it.”

Freya stayed silent for so long Emil almost thought she had left. But no, she was still next to him, still looking at him with that strange look on her face that Emil couldn’t name.

“So, uh,” Emil squirmed, “If you need a Guide, I guess I can be one. I mean, until recently I didn’t even know there was an Afterlife, so...” Emil let out a tiny breathless laugh, “I guess I’ll just have to settle for being a famous explorer of the Silent World in this life, and let Sigrun worry about my Afterlife.”

Freya blinked at him, looking like she couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Then the biggest grin he had ever seen on anyone, including Sigrun, split her face. It was so bright, literally, that Emil had to cover his eyes or be blinded by a flash of pink light.

When he lowered his hand, he stared with his mouth hanging open.

Up until that moment, Freya looked like his Nanny. Now, she stood taller than Sigrun but equally muscled, in a strange, elaborate leather and silver armor. Her strangely catlike eyes were still glowing pink, but her face was clear and unlined, her cheekbones so sharp she could have given Lalli a run for his money. Her hair was long and golden, flowing in the nonexistent wind, glossy and shiny in the way that would take Emil at least two hours and some very expensive products to achieve. It was, somewhat bizarrely, the exact same color as his.

In short, she was the most beautiful person he had ever seen.

And she was still grinning at him.

“Emil Västerström,” her voice thundered throughout the house, “Few of my creations have surprised me like you have, and even fewer did it so pleasantly! You have accepted the task I have given you, and did so with grace! It merits a reward, I say! For the duty you have taken upon your shoulders, I shall give you three gifts. Use them well.”

Before Emil could even begin to wrap his head around that speech, Freya drew a fiery rune over Emil’s heart. It felt like a molten hot knife stabbing him in the chest, but the pain only lasted a second. She then took Emil’s face in her hands, laid a gentle kiss on his forehead, and that same warmth suffused his entire face in a blushing wave. She leaned away to look at him, but did not let go. Her Sigrun-like grin had not slipped for a moment.

Then she surged forward again, and planted a long, lingering kiss on his lips.

So it turned out that Emil’s face could, in fact, get even redder.

Freya, if anything, looked even more delighted. "Now, my darling, you have some preparations to do for the journey ahead of you. And I must go speak with the Allfather. He will try to meddle as he always does, but on this matter he will yield to me. He knows it is both necessary, and that it is a bad idea to make me cross with him."

"O-okay?" Emil stuttered. What the hell else was he supposed to say?

Freya patted his cheek affectionately, stepped back, and disappeared as she had come, in a wave of pink light, leaving nothing but the memory of his Nanny behind.

Emil looked down at the three-headed cat he was still holding. Even though he was clutching it to his chest hard enough that a normal cat would be squirming in protest, the former ghost was perfectly placid and happy to be there.

Emil wished he could say the same. "What the hell did I just get myself into?"

He could have sworn the cat shrugged.

Chapter End Notes

Like it? This was one of the two scenes I vividly remember from my dream. Not sure I managed to portray it as well as I would have liked, but eh. This is a low effort fic, and I got the point across, I think.

The next chapter features the last scene from my dream, and the last part of the outline. After that, we're flying blind. Well, I'm still writing the outline based on what I'd like it to end like, but it's no longer dream-authentic.

'Gjenganger' was, in old Norse, a kind of a ghost, or a wraith. Sources disagree whether they were corporeal or not, but it's the closest I managed to find that describes the SSSS ghosts. Draugr is also another word revenants, or zombies. Basically things that come back from the grave, but in their original bodies, albeit mangled. That's the trolls, beasties and giants.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Run, Reynir, run! To your damnation or your salvation, you will find out only when you are too deep to get out.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Emil unintentionally cut himself off with a jaw-splitting yawn.

“Sorry,” he mumbled as he rubbed at his eye, “I’m just... really tired.”

“No kidding,” Sigrun said, her eyebrows almost touching her hairline, “Here we thought you’ve been having a catnap, and you were talking to a Goddess! Hell, I can’t even blame you for screaming your head off, considering the company you were keeping in it!”

“Huh? What screaming?”

“You don’t know?” Sigrun asked, “Every night, just after sundown, you’d start yelling like you were being murdered, and got a fever so high Mikkel was worried your brain was gonna start melting out of your ears.”

Ah. That.

“It wasn’t because of... any visitors,” Emil rubbed his eye with the heel of his palm, “It’s because of the fire. When Freya said I’d have to carry the fire from Östersund to the fireplace with my bare hands, she was being literal. It, uh, isn’t very pleasant, even if it is a dream.”

It really wasn’t, but it was the trigger to resetting the Dreamspace. Emil had to wait at the window for the fire to reach the house, then literally gather it into his hands like he was scooping water from a well, and carefully carry it to rest on the logs of the hearth.

Freya had been right: it *burned*. It hurt like he was holding both hands on the stove. It burned all the way from the window to the fireplace, a path which took much longer to walk than it realistically should have, and left him exhausted by the time it was done.

But Emil had no choice but to do it. It was either that or the dream would burn, him along with it. Before, whenever the dream-memory of his home burning happened, Emil would have woken up well before the flames reached the house.

Now, that wasn’t an option. It was either burn his hands, or burn alive, and the ghost-cats with him. He didn’t know what would happen to him or them if Emil failed his duty, but he was determined not to find out either way.

He must have been staring at his hands for a moment too long, because the next thing he knew, Lalli was taking his hands and pulling him up. Mikkel was packing the stove away, the bowl already

washed.

“I think it’s time to get some rest,” Mikkel told him, “Considering our most recent visitor, Sigrun is insisting we all move to the sleeping quarters. Safety in numbers and all that.”

Emil just nodded and let Lalli drag him into the tank. Sigrun and Tuuri were on the front seat, quietly discussing something. Reynir was there already, setting the bedding down.

He was still refusing to look at Emil.

Emil had a bad feeling about that.

But bad feeling or no, he was just so damn *tired*. He shed his boots and jacket and just crawled into his bunk, collapsing face-first onto the pillow.

Someone, probably Lalli, spread a blanket over him and patted his hair into some semblance of order. Emil tiredly gave him a thumbs-up.

He was asleep before the others even came in.

Reynir couldn’t sleep.

Everyone else had already dropped off, including Lalli. He had told, or rather gestured, Reynir to go find him in the dreamscape and then rolled under Tuuri’s bunk and fell asleep like nothing was wrong.

Reynir wished he could believe it. He knew he should go seek Onni when he fell asleep, ask him for advice. Onni knew how to summon gods, he would know if Emil was really contacted by a goddess or just lying. At least, Reynir hoped he would. Onni had said he didn’t know much about the Scandinavian gods but they couldn’t be *that* different from his own, could they?

And if Onni said Emil was lying, he would... Do what?

Almost unbidden, his eyes strayed to the handgun Mikkel had handed Tuuri before the troll attack. Neither of them had thought of it when the troll broke through the floor, and with the recent events in everyone’s minds, nobody had thought to remove it from its hiding place under Emil’s bed.

Until now.

Reynir didn’t know if he could do it. If Onni confirmed that Emil needed to die, Reynir was probably going to be the only one in the position to do it. That handgun had the potential to become very important in his future.

If Emil turned out to be a monster. I was still a tossup.

Reynir quietly groaned and pulled the blanket over his head. He was talking himself in circles. Every single course of action he could take started with him falling asleep. Something that seemed impossible at the moment.

Someone put a hand on his forehead.

And Reynir, like a fool, lowered the blanket and looked up.

Violet eyes, glowing like twin moons on a starless sky, were looking straight at him.

Reynir froze.

“You are still afraid of me?” Emil asked in perfect, accentless Icelandic. He heaved a tired but long-suffering sigh. “I guess it’s my own fault. I knew the ‘prisoner’ thing was going to come back and bite me in the butt.”

“H-huh?”

Emil brushed Reynir’s bangs back. His fingers were strangely warm. “Your dog has been waiting for you,” he said, “You should come get him.”

Reynir swallowed thickly. He’d already looked Emil in the eye, and he felt fine. Maybe it was worth the risk. “Where?”

Emil smiled faintly, looking relieved. “Just follow the smoke and you will find my house. If you like, you can even stay for cake.”

Before Reynir could ask, Emil’s hand covered his eyes.

When Reynir opened them again, he was on his boat on the Dreamsea.

Well then. Step one complete?

Now the problem was choosing step two.

He could get Onni. Onni had judged the Pastor Lady safe just by talking to her, he would know if Emil was safe as well.

Or he might just do to him what he tried to do to Reynir when he wandered into his forest the first time. If he thought Emil was a Kade, he probably wouldn’t wait for Emil to explain himself. If Emil fought back, it had a high chance of turning ugly very quickly.

Option two would be to get Lalli. A good idea if Emil was telling the truth, and a death sentence if he was lying. Either way, Lalli would be on Emil’s side, and not really much help in judging Emil’s monstrosity level.

Option three would be to go alone, and see for himself. Judge for himself if Emil was still Emil or something that wanted to devour souls.

It also meant his own judgement would be the only one he could consult.

Option four... Was better off not even considered.

Reynir sighed and looked around. In the distance, he could see a thin pillar of wispy smoke rising into the starry sky, disappearing into the heavens.

Just follow the smoke and you’ll find my house, Emil had said.

Reynir took a deep breath. He had never had to deal with these kind of decisions on his own, without even the advice of his siblings. Everything here depended on him making the right call, and he was forced to make it on his own. He didn’t know if he trusted himself to do it.

But what else was he supposed to do?

Abruptly, he remembered his father's words.

The gods will test those they deem worthy of their attention, Reynir's father had said, If you pass their tests, you will be rewarded, either in this life or the next. If you fail, you will not be the only one damned.

And Onni's.

Tell me, Icelandic mage. These are your gods. What options have they given you?

It got him thinking... Maybe Emil wasn't the only one being tested.

They were right. He couldn't keep relying on other people to make his decisions for him. These were his own gods. He had to prove himself worthy to win their favor. Reynir had been sent with a duty to fulfill. Sent in a crate because of a stupid and poorly executed decision, but sent all the same. The string of coincidences was too well-executed to be entirely unplanned.

...plus, he had to start sometime, didn't he? Trusting himself?

Reynir hopped off the boat and started running in the direction of the smoke, passing by Lalli and Onni's areas without stopping.

He ran and ran and ran. He didn't get tired in dreams, but it seemed to be taking forever, draining not his strength but his confidence. The Dreamsea seemed endlessly expansive, stretching into nothingness in all directions, the rising smoke serving as his only guide. His boat and his farm were far behind him now, Lalli's swamp and Onni's forest long gone out of his sight.

He was leaping into the unknown, following the smoke like his ancestors followed the North Star.

Something huge and frightening moved under the surface of the sea. Reynir didn't dare stop long enough to get a look at it. He had a gut-deep feeling that, if he did, he would be devoured. He kept running and running and running some more. His heart beat like it was a drum at a Midsummer celebration, and Reynir was a dancer around the bonfire, invoking the gods to grant him and his people the fortune to live another year.

This was a lot like that. A trial. Salvation or damnation. If this was a test, Reynir would find out if he was worthy at the end of the line.

So Reynir ran.

A raven cawed above him, following him on his path. The monster under the depths moved along with it, following Reynir as well. The waves started rolling in on the previously calm water, disturbed by the horrors within.

Reynir ran, and didn't look below him.

The waves splashed behind him, droplets turning into mist at the impacts. Something shrieked and screeched, had fought and been defeated. The raven croaked loudly from somewhere, an echoing call of triumph, getting fainter as Reynir got further away.

Reynir ran, and didn't look behind him.

Something ran on either side of him, creatures similar to the wolf beast that had woken up Emil. Out the corner of his eye, Reynir could see golden eyes following him, running alongside him. Not attacking, not chasing. Following. As escort or as predators, Reynir didn't know.

Reynir ran, and didn't look beside him.

Reynir ran.

And outran them all.

Was it just him, or did the smoke seem closer than it was a moment ago?

Reynir barely stopped in time to avoid hitting his nose on a brick chimney. He took a step back, panting, to better see what exactly he was looking at.

It was a sunken house. Below the water, it seemed elaborate and grand, with big windows and a balcony on one side, but the only parts above water were a portion of the roof and a smoking chimney.

Reynir didn't understand. Was he supposed to dive down? How? Even if he wanted to he couldn't go below the water. How was he supposed to get into the house? Down the chimney?

...He hoped he wasn't supposed to go down the chimney.

But... He could see something from the other side of the smoke.

Reynir took a few steps around.

Emil sat on the roof, legs stretched out so they were almost touching the water, crossed at the ankles. Reynir's dog was next to him, with his head resting on Emil's lap. Emil was idly petting it, looking at but not really seeing the endless horizon. He looked like he was dozing sitting up.

"Emil?" Reynir called cautiously, not looking Emil in the eyes just in case.

"I was starting to think you weren't going to come," Emil said, not turning towards Reynir. Dog sat up and happily barked, but did not leave Emil's side. Reynir hoped that was a good sign.

"Sorry. I was running, but your area is really far away from mine," Reynir wrung his hands, once again confronted with the question of 'what now?'.

Emil solved that one for him. He stood up and walked along the roof to a small, latched trapdoor, standing just a few centimeters above the waterline. Reynir cautiously followed him.

"Come on in," Emil waved a hand at the entrance as he opened it, "Just watch where you step."

Reynir looked down. There was a stepladder right underneath it. As Reynir contemplated the best way to get down without breaking his neck, Dog simply bounced down the steps without missing a single one. He got to the floor in a second, then looked up at Reynir and barked. His tail was wagging.

"Okay," Reynir mumbled. If Dog was so sure it was safe, then it probably was. He had a good sense for danger.

Reynir sneaked a glance at Emil, but it didn't seem like he was planning anything nefarious. He seemed mostly tired, trying to hide a yawn behind his hand. Honestly, he looked a lot like Lalli did

when Sigrun made him go looting with her barely an hour after he'd gotten back from scouting.

Dog barked again, waiting for him at the bottom.

Reynir started climbing down.

Chapter End Notes

In other news... Anyone else on Tumblr? Saw the mind-boggling amount of absurd stuff going on? Yeah, my ears are still smoking.

On the other hand, Biden won. Looking forward to seeing Trump dragged kicking and screaming out of the white house.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Wowza, I don't check my inbox for a week and I get flooded with lovely comments! I just want you to know that I love every single one of you. Here's a chapter in return. Go nuts with it, my preciousssss.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The house Emil brought him to was surprisingly warm and cozy, Reynir thought. And nicer than any other house Reynir had seen in his life, with elaborate drawings on the wall in strange patterns, and high ceilings. There was an electric light with glass dangling from it!

That was Reynir's first thought upon reaching the carpeted floors. The second was that Emil was definitely not lying when he said all the ghosts were turned to cats.

There must have been over a hundred of them! Whispy and transparent, obviously ghostly and deformed, but each and every one of them was recognisable as a cat. Reynir was swarmed by loudly meowing apparitions the moment his feet hit the floor. He could only stand there frozen, not sure how to deal with creatures that had wanted to kill and devour him only a few nights ago now wanting him to pet them.

"Shoo, give him some space! Duchess!" Emil came down after him, snapping his fingers for something.

A second later, a fluffy dog with curly, golden fur and soft, floppy ears came running from the hall, sending the cats scrambling. Only the one with three heads remained no matter how much the dog barked, and Emil bent down to pick it up himself.

"Sorry about that," he looked at Reynir apologetically, petting the weird cat in his arms, "This one's really clingy for some reason. Anyway, the kitchen's this way."

Emil led the way and Reynir cautiously followed. His eyes kept straying to the other dog, trotting along next to Dog.

"Is that your Fylgja?" Reynir asked.

"My what?" Emil turned around incredulously, then looked where Reynir was pointing at the golden dog, "Oh, that's Duchess. She was a dog my mother had when I was a kid, but she passed away from old age years ago. Guess she's another memory, like Nanny."

Reynir didn't really know enough about... any of this to really tell if she was. Reynir did have sheep in his Dreamspace, so it was possible that Emil was right. But as far as he knew there weren't supposed to be other people in your Dreamspace at all, memory or no memory, but he didn't know enough to tell if it was impossible or just unusual. Or wrong.

Maybe he really should have brought Onni with him...

“Nanny!” Emil called as they entered the kitchen, “My friend is here, he might stay the night! Father already said it’s alright!”

“That’s wonderful, Emil!” a plump, elderly woman with curly hair and kind eyes clapped her hands in delight, “Would your friend like some refreshments? Some cake?”

“Uh,” Reynir wrung the end of his braid in his hands, not quite daring to look her in the eyes either, for entirely different reasons.

“He’ll have some strawberry-cream cake,” Emil made the decision for him. Reynir watched him walk over to the fireplace and lower the cat on the cushion in front of it with a dozen others. Dog and Duchess quickly joined them, curling up around each other and settling in to nap.

Reynir hesitantly shuffled over to the cuddle pile, curious. The fire in the hearth was blazing, radiating warmth Reynir hadn’t felt since before he started the journey to the Silent World. Almost against his will, Reynir held his hands in front of the fire, enjoying the feeling of lassitude that had suddenly overtaken him. The dogs had the right of it. It didn’t sound like a bad idea to lie down for a minute and rest, just for a moment, it was so nice and it felt safe-

Someone grabbed his arm and pulled him back to his feet so hard Reynir stumbled into their arms.

“*Don’t*,” Emil sounded odd, somewhere between frightened and stern, “*No living creature may come to the hearth before their time*.”

Reynir could see his eyes were glowing purple again. He swallowed compulsively. “W-why?”

Emil blinked and his eyes were back to their normal blue. He seemed... confused.

“I... I don’t know,” he admitted, “I just... Saw you getting closer to the fire and somehow knew that you shouldn’t,” he sighed and ran a hand down his face, “I’m still getting used to this whole ‘Guide’ thing. If only it came with a damn manual or something.”

Having only recently discovered he was a mage himself, Reynir could certainly sympathise. He patted Emil on the shoulder like he’d seen Lalli do, hoping to convey the ‘I know *exactly* how you feel’ sentiment. Emil looked at him weird for it.

“Come on,” Emil nodded towards the dining table, “Never let it be said I promised cake and failed to deliver.”

Reynir was sat down at the table and was promptly presented with a generous slice of sweet smelling biscuit and cream cake. He wasn’t entirely unfamiliar with strawberries, living in Iceland, but he’d never seen them get so big. He speared one with his fork, scooped up some cream, and bit into it.

“Mmmm! This is delicious!” He told Emil.

“Well, after Mikkel’s cooking even dream food is bound to be delicious,” Emil pointed out while Reynir continued to shove cake into his mouth, “There’s more if you want.”

Reynir very much did. Emil’s Nanny left the entire platter with cake on the table and invited Reynir to help himself.

Well, if a Goddess was ordering him to, Reynir couldn’t exactly refuse.

“You really grew up like this?” Reynir asked past a mouthful of cake, this time chocolate. Reynir had only tried it once before in his life, when Guðrun’s boyfriend brought her some. He knew there were greenhouses in southern Iceland that grew some rather exotic fruits, including chocolate, but it was ten times more expensive than coffee, which by itself wasn’t cheap either and reserved almost solely for the military.

“Until I was fourteen, yeah,” Emil shrugged at Reynir’s previous question. He wasn’t eating anything, even though there was some delicious looking food in front of him. Instead, he was looking at the cuddle-pile by the fireplace. “Then the entire town burned down and my family lost everything they owned.”

Reynir froze with another forkful of cake halfway to his mouth.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Emil rolled his eyes, “It happened years ago, and I’m currently in the middle of a crash course in dealing with it,” he waved a hand at the blazing fireplace and Reynir abruptly remembered what Mikkell had said that evening.

“A lot of the trauma we suffer is processed subconsciously,” Mikkell explained once Emil was done talking, “Everyone processes it differently, and it seems to me that Emil has visualised it as ‘taming’ his fire. It would explain the temperature and hallucinations as well. Hopefully he won’t actually hurt himself before he’s done.”

“Did- Did Freya say when you would be done?” Reynir asked hesitantly.

“Not really,” Emil sighed, looking at his hands, “Just that at some point it will stop burning so badly.”

“Can I help?” Reynir asked reflexively, “Somehow?”

“Maybe?” Emil shrugged, “I don’t know, Freya just said that you were supposed to come in here at some point and lead me to someone who would know to ‘open the gates of Heavens’, whatever that means-”

“The Pastor Lady!” Reynir jumped up, sending the cat that had designs on his cake scrambling, “That’s what she meant! I need to take you to her temple!”

“Er, okay?” Emil looked bewildered by Reynir’s exclamation, clutching one of the cats to his chest like a shield, “Wait, now?”

“Okay!” Reynir grabbed Emil’s hand and pulled him towards the hall. “Thanks for the cake!” he yelled back at Freya.

Emil stumbled after him, trying to splutter out a protest, but Reynir didn’t grow up with four older siblings for nothing. He expertly dragged Emil to the stepladder and started climbing.

“Come on!” Reynir called, waving a hand for emphasis.

Emil was still at the bottom, hesitating. Dog went past him up the steps and joined Reynir on the roof with a single dexterous jump.

“Uh, right,” Emil turned to Duchess, “You stay here, keep the cats in line. I’ll come back soon, okay?”

“Okay!” Duchess yipped, tail wagging. Emil patted her head then started climbing. Halfway up he froze and turned around abruptly.

“Wait, what?!” he squeaked, but Duchess was already gone.

“Oh, so she is your Fylgja!” Reynir grinned, “They talk sometimes when they want to tell you something important.”

“That’s not as comforting as you seem to think!” Emil growled and started climbing again, “I don’t even know what a ‘Fylgja’ is!”

“You don’t? Really?”

“I’m Swedish!” Emil groaned as he hauled himself out the trapdoor, “I didn’t even believe in magic and ghosts until they almost killed me! They don’t really teach you this stuff in public school either!”

“Oh,” Reynir helped him up, “They’re companions spirits the gods give every person when they are born. They take shape of all kinds of animals. Kinda cool that ours are both dogs, isn’t it?”

“Marvelous,” Emil bit out and slammed the trapdoor shut, “Now what?”

“We need to go see the Pastor Lady. Her temple is…” Reynir squinted at the horizon. It was very faint, but he was pretty sure it was- “that way.”

“You’re pointing at nothing,” Emil crossed his arms, “And how are we supposed to get there anyway? Swim?”

“Nope, we just walk on water, see?” Reynir stepped out onto sea, spreading his arms like it was a show, “All Icelandic mages can do that. Don’t worry, you don’t have to think about it or anything, even if you fall down you won’t sink.”

Emil watched Reynir dance around on the water with a pained expression on his face. “This entire place makes less and less sense by the damn minute,” he said, but he was gamely walking down the roof. “And I’m not actually a mage. Freya said she wasn’t allowed to make me one.”

“Huh?!” Reynir froze, eyes on Emil’s leg hovering over the water, right over the deep end, “Wait!”

Too late. Emil’s foot fell down… And then the other. Both of them creating small ripples on the surface without sinking.

“Huh,” Emil looked down at his feet, “Feels like walking on a wet carpet.”

Reynir discreetly breathed a sigh of relief. For a minute there he thought Emil was going to sink like Lalli. Reynir imagined he would not have reacted well to that when Reynir just assured him it wouldn’t happen.

“I guess we better get started,” Emil walked past Reynir, “We don’t actually have all night, and I’d rather not end up stranded in the middle of the sea when it’s time to wake up.”

“Don’t worry,” Reynir jogged to keep up with him, “When you wake up you kinda start fading until you disappear, and the next time you fall asleep you end up back in your Dreamspace. It happened to me when I first came to Onni’s area.”

“Who’s Onni?” Emil asked.

“You don’t know? He’s Tuuri’s older brother. He’s with Mikkell on the radio sometimes, when Tuuri’s busy.”

“Oh,” Emil scratched his temple with a frown, “Yeah, Tuuri did talk about him. I just forgot what his name- Wait, you said you went to his Dreamspace?”

“Well, yeah,” Reynir nodded, “He’s a mage too, like Lalli.”

“You went to Lalli’s Dreamspace?” Emil’s eyes were as wide as saucers, “And you could talk to him? Like we’re talking now?”

“Yeah,” Reynir tilted his head, “But I thought you can talk to him in the real world now. You know, with the whole ‘eyes glowing and everybody understanding me’ thing?”

Emil looked nervous. He wrapped his arms around his torso and looked away. “Just because I *can* do it doesn’t mean I know *how*. It’s kinda like how I knew you shouldn’t come too close to the fireplace. It just... *happens*.” He punctuated the last word with a helpless shrug.

“I guess it’s similar to visions, then,” Reynir mused, “Those usually aren’t very pleasant either.”

“I guess,” Emil shrugged, “Are we going to get Lalli then? I don’t know about you, but I’d like at least one person who actually knows what he’s doing with us.”

“Sure!” Reynir agreed. Frankly, he was of the same mind, even though he would have preferred to get Onni. But that was probably a discussion that would go better without Emil there. It was best that Reynir and Lalli explained the situation to him first.

Not that he was telling Emil that. Not yet, anyway.

It was a long way back, but Reynir didn’t see any of the monsters that had chased him to Emil’s Dreamspace. There was something lurking in the depths of the Dreamsea, but it didn’t seem to notice them. Dog pranced ahead carelessly, too, so Reynir supposed they were safe for now.

If only he knew why.

Emil started yawning at some point and lagging behind. Reynir waited until he caught up with them.

“You okay?” Reynir asked, “We’re not that far off anymore.”

“I’m fine, just tired.”

He looked tired as well. He’d been all but falling asleep when Reynir first got here, and now that the adrenaline rush was over he was back to almost nodding off even while standing.

Reynir had to keep him awake somehow. “So, uh...” he started conversationally, “When you said Freya told you she couldn’t make you a mage, what did she mean?”

“Why do you think I would know?” Emil grumbled, “Something about me being a boy, and it being against protocol.”

“Huh. They say that male mages are picked by Odin, and the female ones by Freya,” Reynir mused, “Though there are stories about those who are both. They say it happens when Odin and Freya fight over a single mage and are still undecided by the time the mage is born.”

“What happens to them afterwards?”

“I don’t know, actually,” Reynir shrugged, “I guess they have to decide for themselves which god they prefer, and if they’d like to be a boy or a girl. Or stay in between.”

“Well that way they get the patronage of both gods so I guess I can see the appeal,” Emil said, then sighed, “Not me, though. I’m pretty sure I wasn’t supposed to be magical at all. I would have almost preferred it. I’m still having trouble wrapping my head around this.”

“But,” Reynir turned around, “But if Freya hadn’t intervened, you would have died.”

“Yes, I am painfully aware of that fact,” Emil bit out, “I didn’t say I’m going back on our deal, just that I have no idea what my part in it even *is*,” he sighed again, sounding even more exhausted than before, “I hope this shepherd you’re taking me to actually knows something about... this.”

“She said she was a guide of lost souls when she was alive,” Reynir explained, “Which is pretty much what Freya made you, right? And I have been shown her temple in my visions, so the gods want us to visit her. Maybe she is supposed to teach you about being a guide, and I am supposed to bring you to her. The gods probably planned it like that, too.”

“Freya did mention there was some kind of plan in place for those ghosts,” Emil said, looking contemplatively at his footsteps, “She said I wasn’t part of those plans before, but that things can still go according to them.”

“See?” Reynir grinned, “The gods have a plan, and we just have to follow it!”

“I would have preferred if they just told us what that plan *is*.”

“We did figure it out on our own, though.”

“A confirmation we figured it out correctly, then,” Emil sighed, “Even Sigrun always makes sure her orders are clear.”

Reynir shrugged, not sure what he was supposed to say. He thought the gods had been as clear as they could be, considering they were speaking to mortals. Reynir had enough trouble communicating his visions to other people even when he could understand them perfectly. For gods, it must have been even harder, since they probably knew more than humans could even comprehend.

It was like the Pastor Lady said: the gods worked in mysterious ways, but they would not take their faithful astray. Maybe Emil would listen to her better than he listened to Reynir.

The horizon started shimmering, a few steps later manifesting as a flickering window into a swamp. Reynir grinned, walking faster with a spring in his step. Emil followed curiously.

Lalli was resting on his float, eyes closed and forehead creased in a frown. Reynir went to wake him up, but Emil stopped him.

“What is it?” Reynir asked.

“Let me,” Emil said, looking straight at Lalli. He took a cautious step closer, then another, and another. Reynir stayed where he was, watching them curiously.

Emil stopped just before the plank that led to the float. He stood there for almost a full minute, quiet enough that Lalli didn’t stir. He hadn’t even noticed them come.

Emil knelt down and sat back on his heels. Reynir got the feeling he was nervous.

“Hello, Lalli,” Emil said.

Lalli’s eyes snapped open.

Chapter End Notes

You may have noticed the amount of final chapters has changed. I did some math, and all of the chapters usually end up being about 2k-3k, so that meant I would either have to make longer chapters, or increase the final count. I'm still eyeballing the amount a bit, but 20 should at least be in the right ballpark.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

This chapter is mostly Lalli calling everything stupid and dealing with, mrrrr, *feelings*. Plot resumes after this.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Lalli had waited outside his area for over an hour by the time he realized Reynir wasn't coming.

At first, he thought that something had prevented him from reaching Lalli. Maybe the Beast of the Dreamsea had finally noticed someone carelessly running over it, maybe he had gone to Onni first, maybe he had wandered in the direction of the other Kade's lure, maybe-

Or maybe the stupid shepherd had trouble falling asleep again.

Lalli chose that as the likeliest answer and sighed in frustration at the stupid Icelfinder and his stupid missing not-Luonto. But there wasn't much he could do about it here, so he returned to his area and slowly woke up to the familiar underside of Tuuri's bunk.

He sought out Reynir in the complete darkness, allowing his eyes to glow with magic. His sight fell on Reynir's red braid, and followed it up to his face, where-

Emil's hand covered the Icelfinder's eyes. Lalli followed the arm up to Emil's face, resting on his other hand, eyes closed.

They were both asleep.

Lalli stared, frozen. If they were both asleep, why hadn't Reynir come to get him already?

And then... His stomach sank in his belly.

They were both asleep. Emil was a mage now, he slept above the Dreamsea. Reynir must have found him. They were together, dreaming.

They'd simply not come to get Lalli.

Some part of Lalli thought he should have expected it. He wasn't of much help, being a half-trained Finnish mage. Reynir was stupid and knew nothing, but he could at least find Emil in the vast Dreamsea, whereas Lalli was stuck in his area. He couldn't reach the Priestess on his own, he couldn't reach the foreign gods Reynir and Emil answered to, he couldn't even reach Onni on his own.

In short, he couldn't help Emil. So why would they come get him, when he was useless to them?

Lalli resolutely ignored the way his throat wanted to close up and went back to sleep. He was fine, really. Why should he have expected any different, after all? They didn't need him beyond finding the stupid temple. Just because Lalli had thought-

Well. It didn't matter what Lalli had thought. He should have known better by now. At least, he should have known better after that time when he lost his Luonto and nobody had cared enough to notice he was finally awake. No one had even worried about him.

He turned around and went back to sleep. This was fine. Lalli had always been fine on his own, he was going to be fine now. And maybe Reynir would stop bothering Lalli with his stupidity now that he had another mage to be friends with. And he was sure Emil would appreciate someone who was going to reciprocate his friendship and clumsy but endearing attempts to communicate.

They didn't need Lalli there. They didn't need him for anything other than finding a route home, and certainly not for-

"Hello, Lalli."

Lalli shot up like a startled cat, a banishing runo on the tip of his tongue, but all he saw was-

Emil, on the edge of Lalli's float, smiling cautiously. Behind him, Reynir cheerfully waved.

"Reynir kidnapped me and is taking me to some weird pastor woman, possibly to sacrifice me," Emil blurted out hurriedly, "Please help?"

"What?!" Reynir squawked like a squirrel that had been squeezed too hard, "I won't- She's not- Lalli! Tell him I'm not going to do that! Why would you think I'm going to do that?!"

"You just yelled something about a 'pastor lady' out of nowhere and dragged me out of my house! I wasn't going to rule out the possibility!"

Lalli looked at them, the foreign idiots who had zero notion of personal areas, bickering like children over who started the fight, and he just couldn't help it.

He laughed. It was quiet and hastily smothered into breathless chuckles, but it was laughter all the same. He wasn't entirely sure why. Maybe because Emil leaning over him as he woke up and Reynir saying stupid nonsense was like a bad rendition of *that* dream. Maybe because these two were the closest thing he could call friends and they were so *stupid* that they were actually funny, even though that was a very dangerous thing to be in the Silent World.

But here he was, laughing at them and their stupidity and from something dangerously close to relief.

By the time he was done, Emil and Reynir were pressed together and were looking at him like *he* was possessed one.

"Please tell me you are seeing this too," Reynir whimpered vaguely in Emil's direction.

"Lalli actually laughing?" Emil nodded, "Yep. You sure we're not having a collective hallucination?"

"Maybe."

Lalli rolled his eyes in their direction and hopped up. "You two are so stupid." He paused by Emil's side, suddenly unsure how to express the fluttering mix of feelings in his stomach. Emil still looked adorably befuddled and a little pink in the cheeks, which did not help the weird feeling in his stomach one bit.

"Hey, Lalli," Emil smiled at him, "Uh, you okay?"

Lalli nodded. Then, because he had no idea what to do but was going to explode if he didn't do *something*, he pulled Emil closer by his cloak clasp and quickly rubbed his cheek against Emil's. It made both the confusion and the blush on his face intensify.

Feelings expressed, Lalli schooled his face into his usual blank neutrality, and walked past them, where Reynir's dog was waiting for them past the border of Lalli's area. Somehow, Lalli was not surprised that the dog had more sense of propriety than its owner. "Reynir, take us to your priestess. It is about time we meet her."

Realising he wasn't being followed, he turned around at the edge of his area, one eyebrow raised. Emil and Reynir were still standing rooted to their spots, looking like lost puppies. Emil's hand was still on his cheek. They looked at each other, clearly uncertain, but followed him nevertheless.

"Um, anyway," Reynir paused right outside Lalli's area, looking at the horizon with a stupid, squinty expression, "It feels like she's this way."

"Are you *sure* you know what you're doing?" Emil asked with an extremely skeptical expression on his face, which was somewhat negated by the lingering spots of red high on his cheeks and the fact that his eyes kept darting in Lalli's direction.

"He doesn't," Lalli answered before Reynir could open his mouth, "He knows about as much magic as you do."

"Great," Emil sighed in defeat, "We are going to die. We are going to get eaten by some weird Dream Giant and Mikkell is going to have to explain to Sigrun that we're dead even though our corpses are still breathing. Just marvelous."

"It's a distinct possibility," Lalli nodded in agreement.

"Wow," Reynir looked a little like a spooked rabbit, "I didn't expect you two to be so... morbid."

"We're being realistic," Lalli shrugged, "Well? Start walking."

Reynir looked uncomfortably at the Dreamsea, eyes darting around both below the water and around the sky. Lalli wondered if he had actually seen something to make him so skittish all of a sudden, where before he pranced around without a care in the world. Lalli thought he should probably ask about that. Later.

Emil was more decisive. He shot Lalli a resigned look and stepped out onto the water. Like Reynir, he didn't sink, and his footsteps created temporary but stable ripples that enabled Lalli to walk behind him. Lalli pushed Reynir forward, making him squawk again, then followed Emil.

As he walked, he took a moment to look at Emil. He was dressed similarly to Reynir, in a dark blue tunic with embroidered strips on the bottom edges and on the sash around his waist, but with black trousers and undersleeves, and leather boots. Lalli had never seen him in such an outfit, so he assumed they were mage robes for Icelandic mages.

The only glaring difference between Emil's and Reynir's clothes was the cape. Reaching the backs of his knees, Emil's cape was pitch-black and fluttering in the nonexistent breeze. As he followed Emil, Lalli tried to discern whether the red embroidery designs on the back were supposed to be flowers or flames. Probably flames, knowing Emil, but they might also be the mark of the goddess that gave him his power. Lalli thought to ask, but in the end decided that Emil probably didn't know either.

“Um, you don’t have to walk behind us, you know,” Emil turned around a few minutes into their journey, “Plenty of space here,” he waved a hand at the empty spot next to him.

Lalli would have liked that. Unfortunately, the stupid Iclander had forgotten to mention some important information. *Again*. “I can’t.”

“Uh, why?” Emil tilted his head. He had stopped walking, and thus creating places where Lalli could step, so he was forced to hop over to Reynir’s footsteps.

“I’ll sink,” Lalli admitted grumpily, “Finnish mages can’t walk on the Dreamsea. I can only walk by stepping where you step.”

“Oh,” Emil started walking again, seeming to notice that Lalli was following in his ripples for the first time, “Okay.”

“Hey, why do you think that is?” Reynir, as usual, had no sense of tact, “That we can walk on water and you can’t?”

“I don’t know!” Lalli hissed at him, “I’ve never met foreign mages before.”

“Would Onni know then?” Emil asked over his shoulder, “Reynir said he’s a mage too.”

“He doesn’t. He said it’s just a thing foreign mages do, but he’s never met any before either,” Lalli glared at Reynir, “Onni doesn’t even know how to keep *him* out, even though Onni’s defenses are really strong. Mages aren’t supposed to be able to enter each other’s area without being let in, but those rules don’t seem to apply for him.”

“Oh, uh,” Reynir rubbed the back of his neck with an embarrassed smile, “Sorry. I didn’t realize there was visitation etiquette in dreams.”

“Of course you didn’t,” Lalli rolled his eyes, “Because you don’t know anything.”

“...Sorry,” Lalli’s head swiveled around at Emil’s plaintive apology. What? He didn’t mean Emil!

“This whole Guide thing kinda came out of nowhere, and Freya hadn’t really explained it very well. I’ve been trying to figure it out as I go, and Reynir said this shepherd we’re going to see was a Guide as well, so I was hoping she’d teach me a bit, but-”

Lalli listened to Emil’s anxious babbling for all of ten seconds before he tugged on his cape to stop him in his tracks. “I didn’t mean you.”

“Really?” Emil raised an eyebrow, “I thought that was kinda implied.”

“No,” Lalli sighed, “Nevermind.”

Emil still didn’t look convinced but Lalli didn’t know what to tell him. When Lalli insulted Reynir, the stupid Iclander took it as well-natured ribbing, whether or not Lalli had meant it that way. Emil took it as a deep personal criticism.

“Aw, don’t take it personally!” Reynir hurried to reassure him, “Lalli was just teasing! He says things like that all the time but he’s not being mean, that’s just his way of giving advice. Right, Lalli?”

Reynir was looking at Lalli with a wide smile, Emil was looking at Reynir like he didn’t believe a word he was saying, and Lalli had a horrible sinking feeling that Reynir had just saved him in the

most embarrassing way possible. *Again.*

Gods, who needed enemies when you have friends like these?

“...Yeah,” Lalli squeezed through his teeth, shoulders up around his ears and looking anywhere but at the two of them, “Just ask Tuuri.”

The embarrassment was thankfully worth it, because Emil was smiling like the sun was shining from his face again.

“Ah. Guess I have a lot to learn about you now that we can talk,” he’d actually said that and *meant it*, with that stupid smile and that stupid look in his eyes and Lalli was pretty sure his heart and his stomach were trying to switch places.

Just what kind of powers had his goddess given him?

The moment that thought crossed his mind, Lalli stopped suddenly due to a terrible, sinking feeling in the pit of his gut.

“Reynir,” Lalli called, because Emil probably wouldn’t know, but Lalli needed to know rather urgently, “What is Freya the goddess of?”

Both Reynir and Emil turned to look at him, surprised that Lalli was asking.

“Actually, I’d like to know too,” Emil confessed, “I haven’t actually thought to ask her at the time, and Sigrun didn’t say. Do you know?”

“Of course!” Reynir grinned, looking as pleased as a gluttoned cat that he actually knew something useful for once, “She is one of the gods of *Seiðr*, along with Odin. Most of the mages receive their power from her. She is also the major goddess of war, which is why she answered Emil during the battle!”

Alright, the goddess of war and magic, that would certainly make sense. And it was a good thing, because a goddess of war wouldn’t give Emil any power he didn’t need, like-

“But she’s also the goddess of love and beauty!” Reynir continued cheerfully, “People often pray to her hoping their love would be returned! And she and her brother Freyr are considered the most beautiful of gods, and all the other gods and various *Jöntar* wanted them for spouses.”

...perkele. I was right.

On the one hand, it made sense that a goddess of love and beauty had chosen Emil as her favorite. On the other hand, Emil really, *really* didn’t need any more of her blessings, not unless he wanted everything from humans to trolls falling in love at the sight of him.

Then Lalli remembered the wolf beast that had come into their camp, and cursed long and creatively under his breath.

Chapter End Notes

Emil's mage outfit is based on [this](#), from Minna's art site, but I changed the colors a bit.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

I wrote most of this waiting in a vet clinic on my laptop, because my stupid, stupid dog doesn't know not to eat rotten trash on the street.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

As it turned out, Reynir could talk the ear off a troll. And in the dream world, he didn't strictly even need to breathe. Emil found that out by asking Reynir to tell him everything he knew about the gods, and then noticed Reynir hadn't taken a single breath since he started ten minutes ago.

It was mostly fine. Emil wouldn't have survived his cousins if he couldn't listen and look interested with the best of them, and Reynir could hardly hold a candle to the terrible trio when they got started. The thing that smarted was that Reynir knew a lot of legends and stories about the gods, but very little useful information. Almost nothing, in fact, and he'd clearly given up around the time he started telling a story of how one of the gods, Thor, had to dress up as Freya to get his hammer back. While it *was* funny, it was distinctly unhelpful.

It went on like that the entire journey. At least it kept him awake, if nothing else.

"...so Loki transformed Idunn into a walnut, so he could carry her as a falcon, and flew as fast as he could back to Asgard! But Thiazi came back from fishing then, and wanted to pay court to his new wife. When he saw her gone with a single falcon feather on the floor, he knew immediately it was Loki's fault! He turned into a great eagle and gave chase! Loki flew ahead!"

Reynir stopped abruptly, both walking and talking. Lalli, who had clearly not been paying attention to him, nearly got a mouthful of Reynir's braid.

"There!" Reynir pointed at a distant, glowing spot. Emil had to squint to see what he was talking about, but Lalli had no such problem.

"The temple," he nodded, "The priestess is there also. I can feel her."

Emil... Could definitely feel *something*, but damned if he knew what it was. It was like a strange tingle in his chest, similar to what he felt when the wolf beast came into their camp and called out to him.

Except he got the feeling that, whoever it was over there, wasn't calling to him. It was just... there. Waiting, perhaps. What for, he had no idea.

Lalli pushed him forward, probably to remind him that he was running out of spots to stand on. Emil walked, sneaking a glance at Reynir. He didn't seem concerned, but then again, Reynir had the common sense of a gnat. Emil was more optimistic about Reynir's dog, though, and he seemed perfectly unconcerned.

A shimmering window materialised as if out of the mist before them, revealing a... church.

“Huh,” Emil tilted his head, “This takes me back. We had one of those in Östersund.”

“Really?” Reynir asked, “I thought you said Swedes don’t believe in gods.”

“We don’t,” Emil shrugged, “It was mostly a tourist attraction. It held rows of displays with Old World artifacts, and every Sunday old people would tell stories about what life was like before. I used to go sometimes with one of my tutors before it, uh, was gone.”

“Oh,” Reynir said, “Yeah, it’s like that in Iceland as well. But don’t worry, you’ll like Old Lady Pastor. She’s really nice, and she’ll probably feed us cake too. And some weird soup in a cup.”

“You mean... tea?” Emil asked.

“Sure, that too!”

Out of the corner of his eye, Emil could see Lalli rolling his eyes. Oh, good, he wasn’t the only one who thought Reynir was being weird.

On the inside, the church was similar to the one from Emil’s youth, except instead of glass displays it held rows of wooden benches. In one of them, right in front of the altar was a woman, her hands clasped in front of her and her head bowed.

“Old Lady Pastor!” Reynir waved his hand like an overexcited dog would wag his tail, “I’m back! And I brought friends!”

“Reynir?” the woman turned around, looking pleasantly surprised to see him, “Well, do come in. And who might you be?”

The question was clearly addressed to Emil and Lalli. Lalli shot her a deeply distrustful look and made sure to stay well behind Reynir. Oh well, it wasn’t like Emil was unused to being the only one with any social graces to his name among this lot.

“My name is Emil,” he stepped forward with a pleasant smile, “And this is Lalli. I hope you forgive us for barging in here like this, but we are in need of your help.”

“My, how polite!” the old woman seemed delightfully surprised that at least one of her guests wasn’t raised by wolves, “And you are most welcome here! The doors to the house of God are always open to those in need.”

In short order, they were sat around a tea table in one of the side rooms with big windows. There was cake and coffee waiting for them and they were encouraged to help themselves. Lalli certainly didn’t wait, just grabbed the cake with his hand and started munching on it without bothering with the fork. Emil accepted a cup of coffee with another polite smile.

“Now,” the old pastor asked after a fortifying sip, “What can I help you with?”

“Remember those ghosts that were following us?” Reynir blurted out, “They, uh, they attacked us a few days ago.”

“Oh dear,” the old pastor lowered her cup, “Are any of you in need of my guidance then?”

“Yes,” Emil took over, “That would be me. You see, when we were attacked, the first ghost tried to possess me, and all the others followed. One of the gods, Freya, helped me...”

Emil tried to summarize the events of the past week, hoping he didn't sound too much like a crazy person. To her credit, no matter how outlandish the tale sounded even to Emil, who had actually lived through it, the old pastor listened to him patiently. Reynir occasionally butted in when he thought Emil was leaving some important information out, leaving Emil to try and wrestle the tale back on track. Lalli just ate his cake and admired the architecture.

By the time they were finished, the old pastor had an unreadable expression on her face. After nearly a minute of silence, she heaved a sigh.

"I have to admit, this is not the kind of help I expected you to ask of me."

Emil's heart sank. "So you can't help us?"

"I didn't say that," the old pastor corrected him, "I do not know yet. It was indeed my job to guide lost souls when I was alive, both living and dead. But I am not sure if I will be of use to you and your Pagan gods. I serve the Heavenly Father, and I have no intention of changing that. I do not know how to teach you to do what I do if you do not wish to convert."

"But I think we were supposed to bring them to you," Emil protested, "Freya said they couldn't accept those ghosts because they took some kind of poison when they were alive, and it trapped them on Earth somehow. Before she made me a Guide, she said that I was supposed to bring them to someone who can open the gates of heavens, and that that god would accept them for their own. That's supposed to be you, right?"

"Hmm," the old pastor looked thoughtful, "Perhaps."

"And your god will accept them?" Emil asked somewhat desperately.

"If they wish to go, yes," the old pastor nodded, "My memory has grown faulty in the years since I died, but I remember not all of my charges were believers. Some denied god even in their death, but as long as they allowed themselves to be guided, I was able to help them pass on."

"And you can still do it, right?" Emil asked.

"Of course."

"Thank all the gods," Emil breathed a sigh of relief, "We left them all at my house, if you would just come with us we can take you to them."

"Ah, that might be a problem," the old pastor smiled sadly.

"You can't leave, can you?" Lalli spoke for the first time, looking at her shrewdly, "You are anchored to this place after all."

"I am," the old pastor nodded.

"They why couldn't we find you the last time we were here?" Lalli asked insistently, "Your area was here, but it was empty. That shouldn't happen if you were-" Lalli abruptly stopped. His eyes went wide and his shoulders tensed. He looked like he had just spotted a troll.

"You are not a ghost, are you?" he asked quietly.

The old pastor smiled mildly. "Not quite."

“Oh,” Reynir butted in, trying to diffuse the sudden tension “What are you then? If... you don’t mind us asking...?”

Neither the old pastor nor Lalli paid him any mind. They continued their stare-off without blinking. Lalli looked tense as a bowstring. Emil half expected his hair to puff up like Kitty’s fur when she sensed danger. The old pastor, on the other hand, was perfectly calm.

Reynir opened his mouth again, but Emil elbowed him in the ribs before he could get a word out. He didn’t understand what was going on either, but he knew enough not to butt in.

Finally, after a small eternity, Lalli gave a single unhappy nod. “Mrr. *Fine*,” he grumbled, then stood up “I’m going to look around, see if I can find something I can use to find this place.”

“That’s fine,” the old pastor nodded, apparently satisfied, “Feel free to roam around.”

For some reason, Lalli glared even harder at her. Emil wondered if he actually *should* ask what that was all about, but Lalli dashed off a second later. Reynir spluttered almost incoherently and ran off after him, yelling something about Lalli not breaking anything.

Emil was left with the old pastor.

“Oh, I apologise,” Emil said, “But I never got your name.”

“That’s alright,” the old pastor’s lip quirked, “I’m afraid I don’t remember it myself.”

“Oh,” Emil felt horrible, “I suppose that, after so much time-”

He didn’t really know how to finish that thought. What was he supposed to say to someone who had been dead and stranded in the same place for ninety years? Every other ghost that had met the same fate had gone mad and hateful. So how had she...?

“Excuse me for being rude,” Emil pressed his lips until they were white, “But how are you so... *normal*? I mean,” he spluttered a bit, “All the other ghosts were so... Angry and sad and- But you-”

The old pastor looked at him kindly, and for a moment, she reminded Emil of his nanny. “Oh, young man, your kindness does you credit. But you need not worry about me. Through my faith, I have been protected, and my mind preserved, if not my memory. The heavenly father takes care of his own, that has always held true. For all gods, as it turns out,” her smile turned a little bemused, “I must admit, I do not remember much about your gods, but if they had chosen you for such a task, then they must have as much faith in you as you have in them. And I assure you, that is no small thing.”

Emil squirmed. “Well, that’s the thing. I’m Swedish.”

The old pastor frowned in confusion. Right, he should probably explain. “Uh, I don’t know what things were like in the Old World, but generally, the Swedish do not believe in any gods. I’ve, ah, recently learned that doesn’t mean we are ignored by them, but...”

“Hmm,” the old pastor nodded as if she understood. Which was certainly an accomplishment, since Emil didn’t really understand it himself, “Yes, most of Scandinavia is largely atheistic, I remember that much. Or it was, I suppose,” she poured herself another cup of coffee, then offered some to Emil. He held up his cup in acceptance. “There is a story I do remember, that may be of use here. Tell me, Emil, do you believe atheists are created by god as well as their believers?”

Emil frowned at the non-sequitur. “I... guess?” he shrugged, “I mean, Reynir said they give everyone a Fylgja when they are born. I have one too, apparently, even though I didn’t believe in them until one literally appeared before me. So, yes?”

“Quite right. And why do you think that is?” she asked, “Why would god create someone who doesn’t believe in them?”

Emil had no idea, and he said so.

“Because an atheist is the purest example of human nature,” the old pastor smiled strangely, “When they are being kind, it is not because they expect rewards in the afterlife. When they stop themselves from hurting others in their anger, it is not because they fear divine punishment. They are their own moral compass, and they do what they believe is right regardless of what god has in mind for them. They simply do good because it is right, and god delights in those people as much as in any of his most devout.

“And if they do return to faith at some point, they will never be turned away. We are all god’s children, and nothing makes parents happier than to see their children grown up, no longer needing them, and yet still coming to them for love and advice.”

Emil stayed silent, trying to work through the old pastor’s words. In light of her metaphor, he thought about his own parents and grimaced. Yeah, they probably weren’t a good example of the kind of parenting the old pastor was talking about.

But... Then he thought about Aunt Siv and Uncle Torbjörn, who had pretty much taken on the mantle of his parents after Emil’s father... couldn’t anymore. His mother died when he was still a kid, and his father had never really recovered from that. And when their fortunes were lost in the Östersund fire...

That had been the end of him.

But Torbjörn and Siv had weathered it with far more grace, and they’d taken Emil under their wing no matter how much of a brat he had been. They’d been concerned but supportive when he decided to join the Cleansers, and never hesitated to invite him to their house when he was on leave. They’d been equal part worried about him and delighted when he accepted their offer to explore the Silent World, and always exchanged a few words with him over the radio, to make sure he was still in one piece.

“I guess you’re right,” Emil mused, “And you think Freya is like that too?”

“Well, I can’t speak for any other gods,” the old pastor reminded him pointedly, “But going purely from what you’ve told me, it is likely.”

“Are you sure you can’t teach me how to guide souls like you do?” Emil asked again, “Or at least show me? Freya said there are no other Guides now, that they haven’t made any since who knows when,” Emil’s shoulders slumped, “I don’t know who else to turn to.”

The old pastor looked regretful, but in the end sighed. “I’ll try. That is all I can promise you.”

“It’s more than I expected, honestly,” a breathless laugh left his lips, “Thank you.”

“You are very welcome,” the old pastor was smiling at him again, “And do have a little faith, young man. Your little friends will be able to find my parish, and this church. Then we’ll see what we can

do,” she poured him another cup of coffee, “Until then, have some more coffee. That much I *can* do, and you look like you need it.”

Chapter End Notes

Back to the plot, with little bit of cross-religious exchange. The talk pastor Anne tells Emil is actually from Tales of Hasidim, but I first heard it from my religion teacher in high school, who was a catholic nun, so I figure a Protestant pastor would at least know it. I hope I managed to be respectful to all religions involved while keeping everyone in character, but let me know if I did something stupid unintentionally.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Mostly about Mikkell and Sigrun, with a smidge of plot.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Reynir, Emil and Lalli were still sleeping, well past the point the rest of the crew was up and about.

Mikkell hoped it wouldn't become a habit.

Granted, there wasn't much for them to do right now, stranded as they were, so Mikkell decided against bringing it up. But when they did inevitably resume their course they were going to have to start pulling their weight again.

Also, the positions they fell asleep in were raising some eyebrows.

"I hope Emil hasn't changed his mind all of a sudden," Sigrun remarked, looking at Emil sleeping with his hand on Reynir's forehead from Tuuri's office chair, "Not that there's anything wrong with Freckles, he's cute if you're into that sort of thing. But I thought Pretty Boy had his heart set on Twigs."

Mikkell handed her a bowl of breakfast porridge. "I don't think so. Emil hasn't struck me as fickle, not about this. It is more likely that they are having their own dream conference."

Sigrun raised an eyebrow and smirked around her spoon. "Yeah, I can imagine how well that is going."

"You don't seem to have a lot of faith in the ability of our resident mages."

"It's not their abilities I doubt," Sigrun rolled her eyes, "I just have a healthy level of escapism for Twigs' ability not to pull out Freckles' braid and beat him with it, and even less when there's no real-world consequences."

"I think the word you're looking for is 'scepticism'," Mikkell leaned against the doorframe with his own bowl, looking down at the boys, "And I wouldn't be so sure."

"You think Twigs wouldn't do it?"

"Oh, absolutely, if Reynir annoyed him enough," Mikkell shrugged, "But he won't risk doing it if Emil could see, and it is safe to say that wherever they are, Emil is with them."

"Bold of you to assume Loverboy wouldn't hold Freckles down while Pipsqueak went full-feral wildcat on him, and not in the fun way."

"H-hmm," Mikkell smothered his chuckles into a spoonful of porridge. Once he was relatively certain it would stay down and not come back through his nose, he turned to Sigrun, "Thank you for that mental image, I shall carry it with me for the rest of my life."

“You’re welcome!” Sigrun grinned. At this point, Mikkell wasn’t even sure if she was fucking with him or if she was truly imperivous to any and all kinds of sarcastic remarks.

“Speaking of going full-feral wildcat,” Sigrun put her bowl aside and stretched languidly, “I’m about to be next if I don’t find something to do. Gods, either smite me properly or send me a troll so I can earn my seat in Valhalla.”

“I have no doubt you will find something interesting to do soon. I might even help,” Mikkell said mildly.

Sigrun, being Sigrun, took it the entirely wrong way. Her smile turned sly, and her look turned shrewd. “You offering to do it the fun way?”

For a moment, Mikkell was absolutely sure she was bluffing. He had thought he’d gotten a pretty good read on everyone on the team, and he hadn’t pegged Sigrun as the type to- well, *fraternize* while the mission was still underway. Or with someone she technically outranked.

“Isn’t this against protocol?” he asked, voice mild and amused.

“Our mission is over,” Sigrun pointed out, “Our objective was filled the moment we got orders to retreat. Plus, we’re off the clock right now. Might as well make the waiting part of ‘hurry up and wait’ a bit fun.”

She was serious.

Mikkell prided himself on being a calm and rational man no matter what kind of loops life threw at him. There were very, very few things that could render him speechless. It appeared Sigrun had just expanded that list.

“You are awfully sure I would be interested,” he managed to say without sounding strangled. Mostly. Eventually. After a false start or two.

Sigrun’s eyebrow shot up at that. “Mikkell, the day I don’t notice a man looking at me the way you do is the day I become troll food,” she shrugged, seeming completely nonchalant about it, “To be fair, you were more subtle than what I’m used to back home.”

Knowing what he knew of Norwgians, that probably wasn’t hard. But Mikkell had thought he’d been *actually* subtle. When a job was underway it was easy to switch his thinking of Sigrun as ‘the captain’ instead of simply ‘Sigrun’. But when he was cooking, or washing their uniforms, doing the dishes or cleaning, or any of the other million and one little tasks that needed to be done to keep the team comfortable, he let himself relax and let his mind and eye wander.

And sometimes, Sigrun took Emil out of the tank to ‘teach him how to be a kick-ass Viking’. It mostly involved shooting practice and hand-to-hand combat training, along with a steady stream of hunting wisdom. Most of said wisdom was even useful.

Emil lapped all of Sigrun’s attention and praise like he had been starving for it his whole life, so he had definitely not seen Mikkell shooting Sigrun appreciative glances, alternately admiring her grace, her sharpshooting, her skill with a dagger, her stories, her patience with Emil. Generally admiring Sigrun. And until that moment, he had thought she had been too preoccupied to notice.

Of all the things he could have misjudged about Sigrun, one of those being her powers of observation might have been the most stupid on his part.

“Guess that’s a no,” Sigrun sighed, when Mikkell had been quiet for too long, “Fair enough. I am still your commanding officer as long as this mission lasts, and I know some people have issues with that.”

She eyed him contemplatively for a moment. “*Is* that the issue here? Or did I....,” she waved her fingers in a strange gesture. Mikkell assumed she meant ‘misunderstood the situation’, but he had just learned his lesson about assuming anything with Sigrun.

Well. Either way, Mikkell had not made it this far in the world by balking at a challenge.

“You are right in thinking I would be interested,” he admitted cautiously, “And the fact that you are my captain *is* a concern. But if we were to start something of that nature, I would prefer it to be an actual relationship. Not just stress relief.”

Sigrun seemed surprised at that. “Well, yeah! If it was just stress relief I could have taken care of that myself. C’mon Big Guy, I thought you were smarter than that!”

“It has recently come to my attention that you are more than capable of shooting my assumptions clear out of the water,” Mikkell smiled, “I thought it would be prudent to check.”

“That’s that then,” Sigrun nodded, clearly satisfied with herself, and leaned back with her hands behind her head, “When we get back to civilization and get our money, I’m taking you on a date! With real, actual food, because I’m never letting you cook again unless I’m literally starving.”

“Something to look forward to, then,” Mikkell agreed. Sigrun grinned.

And maybe there really was something to this whole gods business, because right at that moment the most beautiful sounds of an engine starting to roar reached their ears.

Tuuri came running in a moment later, looking wild-eyed and a little manic, but otherwise absolutely ecstatic. “I- I did it! I am *amazing!*”

“Holly shit, you sure are!” Sigrun leapt to her feet in astonishment. A moment later she was grinning from ear to ear. “That’s the best sound I heard all week! High five!”

Tuuri enthusiastically tried to slap Sigrun’s hand, ended up missing and slapping Sigrun’s face, then melted into remorse and apologies. Mikkell wondered just how much sleep *she* had been getting.

“Go take a nap,” Mikkell ordered, “At least two hours. I’ll drive in the meantime.”

“You can drive?” Tuuri sounded surprised.

“Well, I can press the gas pedal and shift into gear,” Mikkell admitted the extent of his driving abilities, “As long as I don’t have to steer too much I should be fine.”

Tuuri looked like she wanted to protest, vehemently, but exhaustion and protocol were keeping her quiet. She nearly toppled over when Sigrun slapped her back.

“Relax, Puffy-head,” Sigrun didn’t look the least bit concerned, “As long as his driving isn’t as bad as his cooking, we should at least not die until you’re ready to get back to the wheel. Go to sleep, that’s an order.”

Faced with two superiors giving her the same order, Tuuri nodded and dragged herself off to her bunk. She did a double-take at Emil and Reynir’s position, but ultimately decided she was too tired to be

bothered right now. She toed off her boots and collapsed on her bunk fully clothed.

“Poor kid, she’s been working harder than the rest of us put together this past few days,” Sigrun remarked, sounding none too happy about it, “Some Captain I turned out to be,” she muttered under her breath.

Mikkel wasn’t surprised she was feeling a bit useless. It was obvious it had been bothering her for days now. “Under the current circumstances, no one could have asked for more.”

“You don’t need to try and make me feel be-”

“Everyone on the team is still alive and uninjured, including the unplanned civilian, thanks to you,” Mikkel cut her off, “The mission objective is complete despite less than ideal circumstances. I’ve seen much better funded and equipped missions fail, for one reason or another. You’ve kept this team together and going forward,” he gently pried her scratching fingers away from her wounded arm, “If you can keep doing that, I can keep us all functioning long enough to get us home.”

Sigrun side-eyed him, but Mikkel kept his expression steadfast. A moment later, a corner of her lip curled up: spirits lifted, but not entirely settled back into her usual confidence. “Alright, Big Guy, make good on your boasting. Let’s get this rust-bucket moving.”

Mikkel had very much not been boasting, but he had been sincere in his assessment of his driving skills. The path had been relatively straightforward, and once they found the right road the trip had gone almost smoothly. Mikkel kept both hands firmly on the wheel and granted the road much more focus than it probably deserved, but he had avoided a ditch and several ancient cars without even waking up anyone in the back, so he counted it as a success.

And then the motor exploded.

“Well,” Sigrun coughed through the smoke, “It’s not actually a bad place to stop. Good work, soldier.”

Mikkel supposed he wasn’t the only one looking for silver linings.

“What’s going on!?” Reynir came running in his socks, pulling his mask on in a hurry, “Are we under attack?”

“No,” Mikkel assured him, “Just a vehicle malfunction. We’re about to stop for the night anyway.”

Instead of assuring him, the words made Reynir go pale. He shot towards the tank window and threw it open, then nearly ended up falling out when he shoved half his body out of it. Upon seeing the sun sufficiently far from the horizon he breathed a sigh of relief.

Mikkel put two and two together. “I assume Emil’s episodes are going to continue, then?”

“Yeah,” Reynir worried his braid between his hands, looking anxious, “We- We don’t know for how long. But he said it will get easier. Eventually.”

Mikkel nodded. He’d been expecting as much, though he had hoped otherwise. “You know where the supplies are.”

He patted Reynir on the back and went to try and get the radio working. Lalli passed him while nearly unhinging his jaw with the force of his yawn, followed by Tuuri and her power tools. Emil was distinctly absent.

“Just let him sleep,” Reynir told him when he asked, lugging the washtub outside, “Hopefully he’s *actually* sleeping, and not out on the Dreamsea somewhere. That could turn out *real bad*. ”

Mikkel decided against asking, as he could not do anything about it. Reynir set the washtub by the tank and unhooked the hose, well familiar with how it worked after helping Mikkel with the laundry so many times. He filled it only halfway, then grabbed a bucket and went around collecting leftover snow around them. He dumped it into the tub then went back for more.

“Huh,” Sigrun poked her head around the tank, still holding Tuuri’s toolbox, “Guess that’s how we’re doing it now.”

“So it seems,” Mikkel eyed Reynir doubtfully as he stole some of Tuuri’s report ink and drew tiny staves on each of the wooden boards comprising the washtub. Sigrun came closer to inspect his work, and she must have recognised at least some of Reynir’s drawings as she nodded approvingly and ruffled his hair. Reynir’s resulting smile was positively radiant.

It seemed Sigrun had gotten herself another admiring puppy follower.

The sun had gone over halfway behind the horizon when Lalli disappeared into the tank and came out dragging a still disoriented Emil behind him. In a somewhat amusing display of role reversal, Lalli directed Emil to the bathtub and started pulling his clothes off.

At that point they’d all seen Emil naked and completely out of it more times than they wanted to think about, so nobody even batted an eye at the display. Reynir obediently accepted the clothes Lalli was throwing at him, folding them on reflex. Sigrun came over and helped Emil into the icy water, not a moment too soon as it turned out.

“Aaaah,” Emil’s hands clutched at his hair the moment the sun disappeared behind the horizon. Well practiced by that point, Sigrun pried his fingers away and held his hands in hers to make sure he didn’t hurt himself. Lalli took a cup and started pouring water over Emil’s head, rhythmically chanting all the while.

Emil didn’t scream this time, which was certainly an improvement. However, Mikkel could not honestly say he was much happier with the other changes.

His screams had become gasps of pain, but never turned louder than that. Instead, around nine minutes in, the snow in the tub had melted entirely. By the twelfth minute it started *steaming*. Lalli had long given up on pouring the tub water over his head and instead took to pressing snow to Emil’s forehead, continuously supplied by Reynir.

For some reason, nobody seemed concerned that Emil’s eyes were glowing a bright, almost fluorescent pink.

That was certainly never mentioned in the medical handbook.

This time, the sounds of pain tapered off at just under eighteen minutes. On minute 18, Emil gasped and simply slumped forward, releasing Sigrun’s hands.

“Damn,” Sigrun whistled as she shook out her hands, “Pretty Boy has a *grip*. I was afraid I was going to lose a finger or two by the end there.”

Considering everything Mikkel had seen so far tonight, he thought it prudent to check Sigrun’s fingers, especially on her injured arm. Emil was still awake and slowly gaining his coherency back,

and was aided by both Lalli and Reynir, so Mikkell didn't think he would begrudge him his lack of attention.

He took off Sigrun's gloves and examined her fingers, accompanied by her slightly sarcastic remarks that she was actually joking. Her hands were a bit red in the areas where blood suddenly rushed back after being cut off, but were otherwise fine.

Sigrun's gloves proved to be far more mysterious.

The white leather of the fingers had long lines of black across them. Upon closer inspection, it turned out that it wasn't because of the ink Reynir stole as Sigrun had assumed.

They were burns. Like Sigrun had held something hot enough to turn the impregnated leather into charcoal.

The only thing she'd held were Emil's hands. When Mikkell examined them, they were unburned.

Mikkell remembered the story Emil told, about having to carry wildfire with his bare hands, and worried.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter has been bothering me so much! I had a very clear scene about Mikkell and Sigrun becoming a 'thing' in my head, but it just refused to be put down on paper properly. So yeah, after literally two weeks of banging my head against the wall I threw in the towel. Enjoy!

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

I'm baaaaack! Sorry for the long wait, real life has not been kind lately. But on the other hand, this is the longest chapter yet! Hope that makes up for it.

Also the final number of chapters increased AGAIN because my brain keeps cramming ideas into this story and I am WEAK. So we get extra material that I had not planned AT ALL

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Emil felt... fuzzy.

He was pretty sure someone had just dragged him out of the tub and shoved him into some clothes, only to sit him down and hand him a bowl of Mikkel's porridge. But somehow, he had a feeling he was still dreaming. At least, that was the likeliest explanation for what he was seeing.

Because he was pretty sure that the last time he saw them, Lalli did not have glowing cat ears atop his head and Tuuri's hair was a lot less pointy. He was also pretty sure Sigrun hadn't recently adopted a piebald mare, and that a full grown bull hadn't started following Mikkel around for no reason. He was even pretty sure they weren't actually there, since he assumed they wouldn't have been transparent if they were. Some kind of non-malicious Beast ghosts then? There were plenty of those to go around in the Silent World, so... maybe? Probably.

But... He wasn't actually sure at all.

Everything was... fuzzy.

Reynir's glowing blue hand waved in front of his face. "Hey, are you okay?" he asked, looking concerned for Emil even though *he* was the one glowing, "It's just that... You haven't said a word the entire evening, and your eyes are still- *purple*. Uh, can you even understand me right now?"

He could, so that gave credence to the assumption that this was a dream. For some reason, Reynir did not look all that reassured when Emil nodded at his question. Reynir's dog was there too, wispy and transparent like Emil's cats, resting his snout on Emil's thigh like he was begging for scraps. Which was weird, since it couldn't even eat real food. Or maybe he could? He seemed solid when Emil pet him, at least, but nobody else acted like he was there.

He wondered if the world was broken, or if it was just him.

"Did he get brain damage?" Sigrun asked, "I heard high temperature can literally boil your brains at some point. Mikkel, is that what happened?"

"I think it's unlikely," Mikkel told her calmly, for once not sounding like he was speaking around a potato, "His temperature has risen extremely high before and he has not suffered any ill aftereffects. The most likely explanation is," Mikkel made a face, then quietly sighed in resignation, "Magic."

“And the only mages we have are either the wrong type or totally untrained,” Sigrun slumped against Mikkel’s side, “Well, hopefully we can keep him alive until we get back to Iceland. There’s a whole school of magic over there, there must be someone who will know what happened to him.”

Something poked Emil’s cheek. He turned to see Lalli watching him with a squinty-eyed look, his cat ears flicking like he was deciding whether or not to pounce. It was awfully distracting.

“Can you understand me?” Lalli asked. His ears, like they knew they were being observed, had flattened back with suspicion.

“Yes,” Emil simply said. He understood him better than even in the Dreamworld. Much like an actual cat, Lalli said far more with his body than with his words, and now that he had actual cat ears, for some magical reason, Emil could read him like an open book.

Right now he was clearly worried and unhappy, two things Emil did not want him to be. Impulsively, Emil reached up his hand, cupped one of those fuzzy, tufted ears, and gently stroked his thumb along its length.

That... was a mistake.

Emil could tell almost as soon as he did it. Lalli’s eyes widened, pupils huge, his shoulders went up around his human ears and a full-body shiver went up along his spine so hard Emil could actually see it.

Emil snatched his hand back. “I’m so sorry.”

“Wha- What did you do?!” Lalli stuttered out, blushing like a sunset. Oh gods, Emil had really screwed up, didn’t he?

“I’m sorry. It’s just- Your ears were looking droopy, and-” and Emil really wanted to slap himself. Just because Lalli reminded him of a big cat did not mean he would appreciate being treated like one!

“My *ears*?” Lalli’s eyes, if possible, got even wider, and his hands went to the top of his head. Upon finding nothing, he went pale. “*You can see my Luonto?!?*”

Lalli said that like Emil had walked in on him with his hand down his pants. He had no idea what a Luonto was, but it was clearly yet another thing that Lalli considered private, and therefore none of Emil’s business. His cat ears, apparently a part of this Luonto thing, were pressed flat against his skull. Emil did his best not to look at them.

“I’m so sorry,” he repeated, because he was pretty sure it bore repeating, “I don’t know what that is. But, uh, I can see glowing cat ears atop your head, so if you meant that... Then yeah,” Emil was looking anywhere but Lalli. That patch of dirt over there was fascinating, really. “I’m so sorry.”

“Eeee!” Emil suddenly didn’t need to worry about not looking at Lalli, because his view was almost entirely blocked by an excited Tuuri, “It’s so weird to hear you speak Finnish! Well, I guess you’re not really, Reynir said he hears it as Icelandic, but still!” Tuuri was nearly vibrating with glee, “And you can see souls now! That’s so *cool*! What do I look like?”

“Uh, spiky,” was the first thing Emil thought to blurt out. Then- “Wait, your soul?”

“Yeah, a Luonto is the third part of a soul, and also the guardian entity of a person,” Tuuri explained, “I don’t know if you have something similar, Onni said the Scandinavian gods made humans differently than ours.”

That... Was a lot to unpack, especially for someone who didn't think souls even *existed* until a week ago. Gods, he was so unqualified for this. Actually, Tuuri would have been seriously hard pressed to find someone *less* qualified for this conversation than Emil!

"Um, we have companion spirit animals. Reynir said they're called Fylgjur," Emil eventually said, "But I don't know if they're actually a part of our souls."

But Luontos were. Oh gods, no wonder Lalli had freaked out. Seeing him naked was one thing, but literally seeing his bare soul was a whole different level of private.

"Eee!" Tuuri grinned, "Can you tell what mine is?"

...Or maybe not. Maybe that was just a Lalli thing. Or maybe a mage thing. Argh, who even knew at this point? *Certainly not Emil!*

"Um, maybe a hedgehog?" Emil guessed, profoundly uncomfortable with this conversation but not seeing a graceful way out, "There's some kind of glow around you, and the edges look like hedgehog spikes."

"*Wow!*" Tuuri looked like she was seriously considering taking notes, "So you're an actual mage now! Onni said only the really powerful ones can see souls, and it takes a lot of training! Even he has to meditate first, and he's the best mage at Keuruu. It's kinda weird you can suddenly just see them! You weren't able to before, right?"

"Um, no."

"I wonder why? Reynir didn't know he was a mage until recently, maybe you aren't born with magic powers? Finnish children know almost as soon as their milk teeth grow in, but our gods work differently from yours. And I know your mages are more rare even though there are a lot more of you, and it's kind of an all-or-nothing deal. I mean, even I can use a simple cantrip, and I can't even see omens! Oooh, maybe-"

"Tuuri," Mikkel suddenly stopped her with a heavy hand on her shoulder. "It's getting late. We need to go inside and Emil should rest. I'm sure you can continue your riveting conversation tomorrow."

Emil took back every single mean thing he'd ever said about Mikkel. Tuuri's enthusiasm was all well and appreciated on a good day, but Emil had been decidedly short on good days recently. Or good nights. He really, *really* needed some decent sleep.

"Thanks," Emil sighed. But before he could follow Tuuri to the tank Mikkel stopped him abruptly. He took Emil's jaw in his hand and turned his face this way and that, a pensive look in his eyes.

"Is this another face-cancer thing?" Emil asked sarcastically.

"Well, if anyone could get face-cancer, it would probably be you, the way your luck has been going," Mikkel released him, but didn't look any happier about what he'd seen, "I thought it would be prudent to check."

On second thought, Emil was keeping all of the mean things he'd said about Mikkel. He squirmed past the big Dane so fast Lalli would have been proud of him and made a beeline for his bunk.

As he went to sleep, he absently noticed Lalli pulling Reynir to the side.

"Onni," Lalli told Reynir insistently, "Meidän on hankittava Onni."

Reynir nodded and said something back. Before he fell asleep, Emil wondered why he couldn't understand them anymore.

Onni was worried.

Granted, he was self-aware enough to admit that was pretty much his default state. For every situation he could possibly find himself in, chances were that Onni had already thought up at least a dozen ways it could go horribly wrong. For every situation *Tuuri* ever wanted to get herself into, he could think up two dozen more. It had gotten to the point where his blood pressure skyrocketed every time Tuuri stared at the Keuruu walls for too long.

Onni's boss had on more than one occasion said he needed to find a way to stop stressing out so much, like Onni had a damn *choice!* If there was a way to turn off that particular feature of his brain, Onni would have taken it two decades ago! It sure would have made his life easier. But seeing as there wasn't, he was stuck dealing with it on his own.

So yes, Onni worrying was very much not unusual.

It *was* unusual that he had to worry this much about *Lalli*.

Lalli had always been a little odd. Then again, all mages were said to be 'touched in the head' in some way. That being able to comprehend the will of the gods and see the true forces that governed the world inevitably changed something in a mage's mind, something ordinary people had but mages always lost when their power started manifesting. The price to pay for their abilities, they said, like the mages had a choice in that transaction.

Still, Lalli was a little more odd than even the average mage. As far as Onni was concerned, that was a good thing. It made him more predictable. Lalli liked routine, and quiet, and exploring the forest. He liked human company only in strictly measured doses. He strived to do his duty well, and once he reached a standard he set himself, he had no intentions of changing his methods. It made him more accurate than a fine-tuned clock, and equally predictable. Military life had suited Lalli just fine, unlike Tuuri.

Even back in Saimaa, when they were children, Onni had never had to worry about Lalli like he worried about Tuuri, because he could rest assured that even if Lalli got into trouble, he knew how to avoid danger and he would always be back when he got hungry.

If Tuuri hadn't gotten it into her head to become an explorer and drag Lalli into Taru's scheme, Lalli would have lived his entire life perfectly content to run through the Finnish forests and sleep inside the Keuruu walls, never even expanding his spell repertoire from what Ensi had taught him simply because he didn't need anything more than what he had.

But that had changed now. *Now*, Lalli had made a friend.

And that friend was turning into a Kade.

Onni hated when history chose to repeat itself. Because that was pretty much what was happening here. An unaware mage, caught off guard, turned, and returned into the fold where it could do the most damage. The Hotakainen close to them trying to at least lead their soul to rest, and succumbing themselves. Then taking everyone else with them.

And Onni was, once again, in no position to do anything about it. The last time he was too young. This time, he was too weak, too far away. Helpless to stop it either way.

The only thing Onni could do was rest and gather his energy, and hope with all his heart that Lalli had been smarter than their grandmother and killed the Kade before it woke up.

Onni trusted Lalli, he did. He had faith in his abilities.

Under normal circumstances.

This was as far from normal as it could get. Onni had no idea how Lalli would react when pushed so far out of his comfort zone, and Onni had no way to reach him on his own.

Then there was Reynir.

Onni had known Scandinavian gods were much different from his own, but everything he had seen of their methods so far made him even more grateful that he belonged to the forest. A non-immune shepherd boy, suddenly given powers and sent on an impossible quest? Onni's first thought had been that his gods were punishing him for something, or maybe a generational curse had fallen to him, but no. That was apparently just how his gods operated.

It made him even more anxious, thinking just what one of their mages would become when turned.

And the time to neutralize him safely was running out.

Onni didn't know how much time had passed since the last time Lalli had visited him, but he had a feeling it was at least a few days. He didn't know how long it took to turn a mage into an entirely new Kade, but Hilja's transformation had taken weeks. She had still been dangerous in the meantime, but easier to take out than a full Kade. Even if Lalli was uncertain about killing the first friend he ever made, he still had some room for error.

Or maybe Onni was fooling himself into thinking he had any measure of knowledge or control over the situation. There was so much Onni didn't know, he actually had no idea how much he *didn't* know! It was making him even more anxious than usual. He had no idea what was going on in the Silent World, what Lalli had or hadn't done. He could sense he and Tuuri were still alive, but that was about it. The only way to communicate they had was-

"Hi, Onni!"

-currently doing his best to give Onni a heart attack.

"Oops, sorry!" Reynir picked him up from the forest floor, his hands nearly disappearing in Onni's fluffed-up feathers, "I thought you saw us coming."

Onni absolutely refused to curse in Lalli's presence, who was just a step behind Reynir. That was the only thing preventing the idiotic shepherd boy from learning some words that didn't exist in Icelandic for an extremely good reason.

"What do you want?" Onni grumped once he was safely back on his branch.

"Emil is awake," Lalli told him curtly, "And he's acting weird."

Oh. So that's what it felt like to have your world ending.

“Onni?” Reynir’s voice sounded distant, “Onni? You okay? You don’t have to worry, Emil’s not a Kade. He says he’s not even an actual mage.”

Had he looked either of them straight in the eye recently? Reynir, perhaps, when the rude boy startled him and then stopped him from falling. Lalli usually avoided eye contact unless he was talking to someone familiar or unthreatening, but that didn’t mean much with Onni, who was both.

“He said the Goddess Freya made him a Guide. Like, someone who helps lost souls find their way to the afterlife. Oh, and we found Old Lady Pastor, she said she can help Emil with the ghosts, and maybe even teach him! She-”

“Give up,” Lalli ordered curtly, “He’s not listening.”

“But this is important!”

“When Onni gets like that, you have to wait for him to finish panicking first.”

“...oh. How long does that usually last?”

Lalli didn’t answer. Maybe they just left. Left Onni to his slow and steady doom. The three surviving Hotakainens would share the fate of their grandmother, for many of the same reasons. Oh, the irony. Oh, the humanity! It would not be theirs for much longer. And Onni hadn’t even said goodbye to Tuuri! They were both going to die, and their last interaction would be Onni yelling at her and calling her stupid for being brave enough to fulfill her dream!

“Is... Is he crying?”

“Mm-hmm. He’ll stop eventually.”

“Shouldn’t we... Do something about that?”

“Everything Tuuri and I tried only makes it worse. What would you do?”

“Ummm...”

“Precisely. Leave him alone to calm down.”

And now Lalli had been taken by a Kade, and Tuuri would share the fate of their village, along with her team. Along with Lalli. If Onni was unfortunate enough, he would be alone, all alone in the world, no family at all left. No more Tuuri to tell him about something new she learned and found exciting. Lalli would never again come to him, tired from running through the forest, and quietly tuck himself into Onni’s side. Even if he ever dared to return to Keuruu now, it may as well be an island full of ghosts.

But... There is something strange about this setup.

“Wanna play Cat’s Cradle?”

“Cats don’t have cradles, stupid.”

“It’s just what the game is called. Here, this will do. See, you take a piece of string, tie it in a circle, twist it around your fingers like thiiiiis... So I hold it up and now you pinch here where the string forms double crosses, spread, and pull under. When I let go, you have a new formation held by your thumbs and index fingers. You think you can do it?”

“Mrrr.”

Onni was weak and defenseless. If the Kade wanted to do something to him, now was the prime opportunity.

But the actual Kade was nowhere to be seen, and Lalli and Reynir were playing with strings. They weren't even looking in his direction.

If they were trying to confuse him to get him to lower his guard, it was certainly working.

“See how I did it? Now you need to hook these middle strings with your pinkies, spread them apart, put your thumb and index fingers *here*, invert it like I showed you and hold.”

Lalli was looking at Reynir's fingers, which were hopelessly tangled with string, and followed his instructions in a way that must have made sense to him. The result was that Reynir's fingers were free, and now Lalli's were trapped in the mess.

“Yes, exactly like that! You did great!” Reynir praised with far more elation than Onni thought the weird game merited, “At one point, the formations start to repeat if you do them all correctly, and then you try to do them faster and faster. Or if you mess it up but it's still stable, it's fun to try and figure out how to get it back to a familiar configuration.”

“Mrr,” Lalli grumbled, all of his attention on his tangled fingers, “What now?”

“Here, watch,” Reynir slowly twisted his fingers around the lower crossed sections, “See, now you do this one like I showed you, but you have to do it from underneath.”

Or maybe they'd already been corrupted by the Kade. Onni had trouble believing Lalli was not only tolerating Reynir for this long, but was actually following his instructions. Only some kind of supernatural force could make those two actually get along.

“Onni?” Lalli finally noticed they were being watched, “Are you done crying?”

Probably not, but he was in control of himself at the moment. “Yes.”

“Emil is awake, but he's acting weird,” Lalli reported, eyes intently on the string game in his hands, “I think he's growing more powerful.”

“Really?” Reynir interjected before Onni could start panicking again, “He mostly seemed confused to me. And lost.”

“He could see my Luonto,” Lalli said, “You can't, even though you can sense souls over great distances in dreams.”

“I heard Emil say Luontos are similar to Fylgjur,” Reynir commented thoughtfully, “But something how they're not a part of our souls? But Luontos are?”

“...Close enough,” Onni muttered, “Do you remember when I asked you, over the radio, if you could see the natural spirits and the forces of nature of our world?”

“Huh?” Reynir tilted his head, “Oh, yeah! When we were trying to figure out what those ghosts are!”

“Yes,” Onni sighed, remembering the lessons his grandmother imparted upon him, so long ago, “Some are easier to see than others. If they are loose, unanchored, they are easy to see and feel. If they

inhabit simple creatures, like animals, it is still relatively easy to see their spirits, at least for mages of the forest. Trolls and Beasts... They are harder to perceive, but easier to feel, with all their rage and malice bleeding from them. Even you can feel them to some degree. But human souls are complex. Multi-faceted. Their power can rise or wane. Or hide. Sometimes they are as easy to see as an omen, or invisible to the point you have to wonder if they even have it."

"Huh," Reynir tilted his head like a confused puppy, "Okay, so seeing souls is usually hard but not impossible. So why is it such a big deal that Emil could see ours?"

"He touched mine," Lalli said quietly. Onni froze.

"*What?*"

"He did?" Reynir asked.

Lalli's face was as red as a summer strawberry. He stubbornly avoided eye contact and pulled his shoulders up around his ears to hide.

Onni had a bad feeling about this.

"He could see my lynx ears," Lalli mumbled into the fur or his cloak, "He... petted one. I could- *feel it*," Lalli blushed even harder, if that was even possible, "It felt nice."

The only thing Onni could feel was an oncoming heart attack. Actually *touching* someone's Luonto when it hadn't been summoned first- Without even a ritual or an incantation- It should have been *impossible!*

"Oh, so that's what Tuuri was talking about!" Reynir interjected with a smile, "Tuuri said he could see some kind of spikes around her, and that meant her Luonto was probably a hedgehog."

"Wait," Onni waved his wings frantically, "You mean he could see Tuuri's Luonto as well? But she's not a mage, she cannot summon it to part from her!"

"That's what he said," Reynir shrugged, "He seemed really uncomfortable about it," he paused, thought about something that made a crease appear between his brows, then turned to Lalli, "Hey, have you heard the ghosts lately?"

Lalli rolled his eyes. "No, stupid. They're with Emil, of course I haven't heard from them. What does that have to do with-"

"No, no, I mean-," Reynir flapped his hands like he was sounding the alarm, "Back when he wouldn't wake up. We could hear them whispering if we were close enough to him-"

"You *what!?*" Onni squawked.

"-but ever since he woke up I haven't heard anything, even when he's asleep. Have you?"

Lalli stood up straight as it had just occurred to him that, no, he hadn't. "No. Onni, what does that mean?"

Onni's head was starting to spin. If a restless ghost was possessing a living person, a mage hearing whispers from them while the person in question was unconscious would mean the spirit was trying to communicate. That could be either good or bad, depending on if the spirit was seeking help or if it was looking for revenge.

The whispers just stopping either meant the ghost had moved on, which was apparently not the case, or... If the possessed person was a mage, they could learn to trap the spirit inside, cut it off from reaching their conscious mind, and keep it there until it could be dealt with.

Onni had never heard of it actually being *done*, though. To actually try it at all, a mage would have to be either mad or desperate, and in that state they were more likely to be trapped themselves, and the ghost possessing them free to take over their body.

It was similar to how a Kade took its victims. Far too similar for Onni's tastes. Coupled with everything else Reynir and Lalli had told him...

There was no helping it. It had to be done.

"Bring your friend here to me," Onni ordered solemnly, "I have an idea that might help."

"Really?" Reynir perked up, "That's great! Are you going to lead the ghosts to the afterlife?"

"Something like that," Onni said, "I will need a few more days to regain my strength. Try not to do anything stupid until then."

"That's great!" Reynir said again, and turned to Lalli, "Let's go tell Emil!"

"It would be better if you don't," Onni stopped him, "I don't want to get anyone's hopes up. It will either work or it won't. We'll know when it's done."

Lalli ignored Reynir. His attention was reserved solely for Onni, his piercing eyes seeking truthfulness in Onni's words. But Onni never lied, not to them, and the trust born of that certainty was warring with Lalli's instincts.

Lalli could tell there was something odd in his words, Onni knew, but not what it was.

Good. This will be hard enough to do as it is.

Eventually, the tension bled out of Lalli's spine, though his eyes still held a faint look of suspicion. He grabbed Reynir by the front of his robes and dragged him away before the shepherd boy could utter a single coherent protest. They were out of Onni's area in a matter of seconds.

Onni sighed. He had not been fair to Lalli, asking him to kill the first friend he made. Of course Lalli couldn't do it. There were many things Lalli was capable of, but cold blooded murder wasn't one of them. To kill someone he cared about...

No, Onni had been far too unfair, to ask that of Lalli.

It didn't change that fact that it needed to be done.

Lalli was going to hate him for it. Tuuri would too.

But they will be alive to hate him, and at this point, Onni could live with that too.

Oooooo, ominous....

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

A person does not simply wake up one day and know how to be a believer. True faith has to be both earned and learned.

In which Tuuri and Emil talk.

Chapter Notes

Ha! Thought you'd seen the last of me? HAHAAHAHA!

Pretty much plotless, just fluff and dialogue. DO YOU SEE WHY I HAVE TO KEEP INCREASING THE FINAL CHAPTER COUNT?!?!?!?

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tuuri tore another strip of duct tape with her teeth and wrapped it around the shaky engine pipe. She surveyed her handiwork, decided it would hold for a few more kilometers, and started in on tightening the bolts back.

"Hey," Emil greeted her, two bowls of Mikkell's breakfast porridge in his hands, "How's it going?"

"Emil! Almost done," Tuuri waved her wrench with a grin, then wiped her hands on a rag, "Just need to tighten everything up and we're good to go. How are you feeling?"

"Better," Emil handed one of the bowls over, "And I actually slept tonight, that helped a lot."

"That's good to hear!" Tuuri said around a mouthful of porridge, "Everyone was so worried about you. You have no idea how great it is to see you up on your feet and actually coherent."

"Yeah, Sigrun filled me in," Emil cringed a little, "Sorry I scared you all so much."

"You really don't need to apologise," Tuuri hurried to assure him, "Considering what happened- Well, we're just glad you're alive and okay," her lips thinned and her eyes went downcast, "We weren't sure you were going to pull through for a while there."

"Yeah, I know," Emil nodded. He was quiet for a long moment, then set his bowl aside and spread his arms invitingly.

Tuuri didn't need to be told twice. She all but threw her bowl aside and leapt at Emil in a bear hug.

"I was so scared you wouldn't make it," Tuuri confessed, voice going shaky, "I felt so useless, I couldn't do anything! And you weren't waking up, and you sounded like you were in so much pain!"

“I’m better now, I promise,” Emil mumbled into her hair, his arms just as tight around her, “I’m getting better at it, it doesn’t hurt as much anymore. But I’ll be fine in the end, I promise.”

Tuuri didn’t say anything, just tried to gather at least a shred of her composure. Emil didn’t move or complain, simply let her cry on his shoulder, all the relief and unrealized grief pouring out of her eyes in rivers of tears. All those days of fretting and uncertainty and the horrible twisting feeling that seemed to be coming from her very soul... All of it had come to an end, and it refused to be bottled up anymore.

In the back of her mind, she thought she understood why Onni always hugged her with so much force and desperation whenever she did something that made him worry about her.

Eventually, Tuuri mustered up enough willpower to let go. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to blubber all over you like that.”

“Not the worst thing I’ve experienced this morning,” Emil patted her on the shoulder, “Sigrun hugged me so hard I think she would have broken my ribs if her arm wasn’t hurt, and I can’t even yawn in Mikkel’s vicinity without him checking my temperature.”

Tuuri laughed a little helplessly, wiping her face with her sleeve. “Just be happy that’s all he’s checking.”

“Well I’m not falling for the face-cancer joke again, so his options are a little limited,” Emil said dryly, “Not that he doesn’t try. Magic being involved gave him a lot of bonkers theories, even though he knows less about magic than I do at this point.”

“Speaking of magic,” Tuuri looked him over, “I notice you’re speaking Swedish again, and your eyes are normal. Does it just come and go, or do you need to... turn it on?”

Emil shrugged, looking uncomfortable. “A bit of both, I guess. I... *think* I know how to do it on my own, but sometimes it just comes to me,” he made a face at the horizon, “I just wish there was someone I could ask if that was normal.”

“You probably will soon,” Tuuri assured him, “We caught some decent signal this morning, and Mikkel spoke to Trond about contacting the Icelandic Academy of Seidr. Trond knows everyone, so I’m sure they’ll find someone who can help you.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Emil kicked the dirt, not looking at her, “Freya said something about Guides not being needed before. But there was some kind of plan in place, and the only way not to mess it up was to- *turn me*,” Emil sighed, “She said I’m supposed to bring these ghosts to someone who can take them in, but nothing about how I’m supposed to do it, or if Reynir’s Pastor Lady is the one I’m supposed to bring them to.”

“Who else would it be?” Tuuri asked, “Reynir said he found her in a vision, didn’t he? So she must be the right one. And I assume she will be the one to show you how to send them on.”

Emil looked at her strangely. “How can you be so sure?”

“They’re *gods*, Emil,” Tuuri said, a little bewildered, “If they don’t know what they’re doing, we have much bigger problems on our hands.”

“And it’s just- That easy for you,” it was Emil’s turn to be bewildered, “To trust that this is what they want, that we can do it and get out of here alive afterwards. That they’re...” he waved a hand

helplessly, eyes beseeching.

It hit Tuuri like a brick then, what exactly was the problem.

“Right, I keep forgetting Swedes don’t believe in gods. I guess this is all new to you,” she frowned. It seemed strange, almost incomprehensible to her, that there was a whole nation out there who saw with their own eyes all the work their gods did, and could still deny their existence.

Well, at least one Swede couldn’t stay in denial, and Tuuri couldn’t just turn him away. But she wasn’t sure she could explain something she’d simply known her entire life. What seemed simple to her - gods were real, they gave humans souls, and the gift of magic to some - Emil seemed to be struggling with the most. She, who had only heard the gods through her brother and cousin, had an easier time believing in them than someone who had spoken with one directly.

They said seeing was believing, so why was Emil having so much trouble with it? How could it be, that his goddess had more faith in him than he had in her?

Then the lightbulb went off in Tuuri’s head.

“It all comes down to faith,” she said, then sharply turned to Emil, waving her wrench at him pointedly, “You have faith in Sigrun, right? ”

Emil eyed the wrench suspiciously. “Well, of course.”

“And why is that?”

“Because she’s Sigrun,” Emil blurted out without a second’s hesitation. Even though that was precisely the answer she’d been hoping for, Tuuri waved for him to go on.

“Well, at first it was because she was the Captain,” Emil continued after a moment, taking a tiny step back, “But I’ve seen her stride into Troll nests with nothing but a dagger and a boatload of confidence, and come out pretty much dancing in their blood,” he shrugged, taking a pause to think. Tuuri didn’t say anything, but went back to fixing the engine while she waited for him to continue.

“And... She always had faith in me. That’s- No one’s ever trusted me that much, to literally watch their back in a life-or-death situation. So... Even though I was terrified most of the time I didn’t want to let her down, and she hasn’t let *me* down either. And even though she’s so much better than me at *everything*, she insists I could be better too, if she teaches me. So, uh, it would be pretty hard *not* to have faith in her after that.”

By the end of the speech, Emil’s cheeks were petal pink. It was wonderfully touching, and actually even better than Tuuri had hoped for.

Emil was going to do just fine.

“See, that’s called true faith,” she patted his shoulder with a proud smile, “That’s how it works with the gods as well, except on a grander and more worshipful scale. At first you sort of assume faith because they are gods, but you learn true faith through the trials of life. The first time you walked into a Troll nest after Sigrun, you did it on the assumption that she knew how to get you out alive, and when she confirmed that assumption, you trusted that she could and would do it again.

“And this time, your goddess sent you to play your part in her plan, and she gave you the tools you needed to do it. And if everything works out okay in the end, it will be easier to do it a second time, just as it will get easier still the third time. But for now, you just have to assume she knows what she’s

doing, just like you did with Sigrun. And once you get to know her, through your stories and legends and whatever messages she sends you, having faith in her will come naturally.”

Emil looked contemplative, but there was a smidge more understanding in his eyes than before.

“I... Think I get it now,” he grimaced, “Well, okay, I don’t really, but... I think I can take a leap of faith, now that I at least know there’s someone waiting on the other side for me.”

“It’s a start,” Tuuri nodded, “And a definite step forward. Speaking of-,” she slammed the hood back down and took up her toolbox, “It’s time we get moving forward as well.”

“Oh,” Emil startled, and inevitably looked down at Tuuri’s overturned bowl, “But you’ve barely eaten anything.”

“I’ll take an extra helping for lunch,” Tuuri nudged him along before he could say anything else, “Come on, we’re wasting daylight!”

Emil looked like he was going to protest again, so Tuuri sent him stumbling in Mikkel’s direction. Sure enough, Mikkel’s Big Brother instincts, strong enough to give Onni a run for his money, kicked in immediately, and Tuuri was safely able to get into the driver’s seat while Emil futilely tried to escape Mikkel’s fussing.

She hadn’t counted on somebody already being there.

“Damn, Puffy,” Sigrun nearly gave her a heart attack, “That was positively evil.”

“What was?!” Tuuri squeaked, “I didn’t do anything!”

Sigrun smiled devilishly. “Kid, I’m old, not blind. While I would usually be very much against throwing your teammate into the line of fire to escape, that was hilarious, so I’ll let it slide this once. And because you gave that whole speech about faith to him, that was awesome. I really liked the parts about me.”

It was Tuuri’s turn to blush bright red.

“You’re adorable,” Sigrun gleefully informed her, “I’m so going to snatch you up for my division. It’s always good to have a full set.”

“Wh- what?”

“But you were also right about us needing to get going,” Sigrun clapped her hands authoritatively, ignoring Tuuri’s confusion, “Chop-chop, people, we’re sitting ducks over here!”

The last bit was directed at Mikkel and Emil, who were hauling the dishes and the stove back inside. Mikkel looked as perfectly serene as ever, seeming oblivious to the fact that Emil was shooting daggers at him with his eyes.

Tuuri started up the engine, and thank all the gods, it started off rumbling ominously, but soon smoothed out. It still sounded like it was wheezing for breath with every tug of gas, but it was working.

And so they went on, slowly but steadily trudging along. The rest of the team was mostly quiet, Sigrun and Mikkel quietly chatting in the office room, and Emil probably catching another nap with

Lalli and Reynir. Assuming they were off looking for Reynir's priestess, nobody had been eager to wake either of them up unless they had to.

"Hey, Puffy!" Sigrun called from the radio room a few hours later, "We're getting closer to one of those Church things! Time to send out your cousin."

But this was important, so they had no choice.

"Okay, someone wake him up and send him here, I don't want to risk stopping the engine!" Tuuri yelled back.

"I'll get him!" Emil responded. Oh, good, he was probably the one person on the team who didn't run the risk of getting his fingers bitten if Lalli woke up in a bad mood.

Not- That it happened a lot. Anymore. Almost never in the past year, and only once on this trip! To be fair to Lalli, anybody would have been startled upon experiencing Reynir's version of a wakeup call.

Anyway, Lalli probably wouldn't bite Emil no matter how he woke him up, Tuuri was reasonably sure. Because she, like Sigrun, wasn't *blind*. And now that she wasn't fearing for Emil's life and her own sanity and generally about the survival rate of their mission, she had more than enough time to contemplate Lalli's love life.

Hey, if you've got no love life of your own, the least you could do was live vicariously through your younger family members. She was sure Mikkell would agree, at least.

So she waited for Lalli and Sigrun to come to her for translation, but they never came. Worried that Lalli was being more recalcitrant than usual, she risked taking her eyes off the road to look at what was keeping him.

As it turned out, nothing was. Sigrun was pointing at the map and saying something Tuuri couldn't hear over the faulty engine. Emil and Lalli were next to her, listening.

And Emil's eyes were faintly glowing.

Well, that explained it. It hadn't really occurred to Tuuri that they'd technically acquired another translator, but perhaps it should have. Now Emil could do half of her duties while she had to concentrate on keeping the tank moving.

Tuuri smiled to herself. Good. Lalli really needed more people to talk to, and not just in the Dreamworld, and it was even better that the new translator was the same person he had a crush on.

He-he, Tuuri thought giddily, *Things are finally starting to look up. Our mission is finished, we have all the books we could want, Emil is alive and doing okay, Lalli is making friends, and we are on our way back home as famous explorers! This adventure was so worth it! I can't wait to tell Onni!*

But of course, as these things went, it was never that simple.

No sooner had Tuuri thought that, and the engine exploded again.

"Uhhh, okay," Sigrun said, "Guess we're stopping after all. Twigs, you're up! We'll probably still be here when you return. If not, you know how to find us."

Emil repeated her words almost exactly, except they sounded Finnish to Tuuri. Lalli nodded, pulled his hood up, and hopped out of the tank without looking back.

Tuuri sighed and got her toolbox, which was never far from her these days.

Well, back to work, Tuuri thought, Still worth it though!

Chapter End Notes

Tuuri is a darling, isn't she?

Also, it occurred to me on my 13th read that she is the only one who never complained about Mikkel's food, not even once. But in canon, by the time she died, she was practically half the size she started at. Conclusion? Yeah.

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Wherein Reynir has another vision, and figures something out.

Chapter Notes

Another chapter! Brought to you by end of semester exams, because my inspiration is proportional to the amount of studying I have to do, and inversely proportional to the amount of time I have to do it.

Also, if you yell "EMIL YOU OBLIVIOUS DUMBASS" at least once in this chapter, I have done my job properly.

Edit: I just realized some of the final editing changes weren't saved before I posted it and I need to put them back in, so if you reread this chapter some sentences might be slightly different. Sorry about that

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tuuri kept the engine going with nothing but duct tape and some mild form of Finnish magic, Emil was pretty sure. The poor thing kept exploding twice a day for the next two days, and every time Tuuri took her trusted toolbox, soundly cursed out the engine, and somehow managed to convince it to go just a few more clicks north.

By the last time the engine stopped, Sigrun didn't even wake up from her nap, despite the noise. Tuuri took her toolbox, Emil took his rifle and bandolier and out they went. Mikkel, just as well used to it, took the opportunity to do some laundry.

As Tuuri fussed over the engine, Emil idly looked around, looking more for signs of magic than Trolls. Lalli and Reynir had done their best to summarize their respective abilities in an effort to see which ones Emil had in common with them, but through various trials and errors, they'd concluded: almost nothing.

He couldn't use runes. Reynir sketched up a rune he'd seen drawn on heavy objects on a piece of paper, so when it was flicked in the air, it stayed floating. Kitty had had a field day chasing it, but when Emil copied the rune exactly, it remained as just a piece of decoration. No magic to keep it afloat.

Next, Lalli had taken him scouting. Occasionally he'd pointed at a tree or a bird or a puddle and asked Emil if he saw the spirits inhabiting them, but the answer was always no. He didn't even see Lalli's second pair of ears again, though he'd decided against admitting that he'd been looking for them.

Only once, when he'd been petting Kitty while 'powered up', as Sigrun put it, he'd seen her start glowing blue again. Lalli said he was seeing her spirit, but that was about the most he'd managed on his own. In the end, they concluded that his Mage Sight was better than Reynir's, but still leagues behind Lalli's. Had he been Finnish, he wouldn't have even qualified as a proper mage.

That seemed to be the extent of Freya's gifts to him: to speak anyone's native language, to see souls of the living and the dead, and the ability to help them pass on through his own mind.

Well. That, and the ability to accidentally heat bathwater every evening. At this point he was probably the cleanest member of the crew, whether he liked it or not. In an effort to conserve their water and gas, Mikkell decided that whoever wanted a bath was free to use it after Emil. It even stayed warm longer than if Mikkell had heated it over the fire, which was tempting enough that some people actually took him up on that offer.

But that was more of a side-effect than an ability. The fire from his mind bleeding through the cracks and into the physical world. He didn't have any control over it, not outside the Dreamscape, or even outside his area.

Emil refused to be disappointed by that. He'd managed fine with his flamethrower and his grenades so far. That was all the fire control he needed, no godly help necessary. He was a big boy, he could set his own fires the old fashioned way!

...Did he smell smoke?

"Eeep!" Tuuri screamed and jumped away from the burning engine just as Mikkell dumped the entire washtub full of soapy water over it.

"Wharglf?!" Sigrun came running out of the tank, clearly still not entirely coherent.

"I-," Tuuri took one despairing look at the melted engine, "I don't think I can fix it anymore."

"Time for walking now?" Sigrun grimaced. She didn't look any better than she did before her nap.

"Yes," Mikkell, as usual, looked completely unruffled. He took out a folded piece of paper from his jacket and calmly unfurled it. "We have two weeks until the arrival of the boat, but I have prepared plans for this event, so you can all be at ease."

Well at least someone had a plan, even if that someone was Mikkell. Mikkell having plans usually resulted in Emil having to lug something heavy around. Emil glared at the stupid engine that decided it had had enough and decided to set itself on fire to escape its duty.

Tuuri was looking at him strangely.

"Don't look at me, I didn't even breathe in that direction!" he defended himself.

"Oh, of course not!" Tuuri smiled reassuringly, "Your eyes are glowing again. I just wondered if you saw anything out there."

"Oh," yeah, Mikkell's speech *did* seem a lot clearer than usual, and Tuuri's lilting accent was missing, "Sorry. And no, I didn't see anything. I told you it sometimes just comes and goes."

"Emil," Mikkell waved a bit of paper at him, "Ah, excellent, you'll be able to understand each other. You need to take Lalli with you on a shopping trip to the commercial patch we drove past. Hopefully

you can salvage some useful items for us. Here's your list, more important items are on top. Be back before nightfall."

"Uh, sure," Emil took the proffered list and turned to Lalli, who'd just come out to see what all the fuss was about.

"Hey, our engine's busted, so we'll have to walk from now on," Emil filled him in, "Mikkel said we need to go back to that shopping district we passed and get- uh..." Emil frowned at the list, "Actually, I have no idea what these are."

Lalli leaned over to see the list as if he'd have more luck deciphering Mikkel's orders. He made a face at it when he inevitably recognised nothing.

Nothing to it. He'd have to swallow his pride and ask.

"Why are you still here?" Mikkel asked tersely when Emil interrupted his conversation with Sigrun.

"I don't understand half of these words."

Mikkel looked terribly unimpressed with him, but he did take the paper back and made tiny drawings of the items they needed, explaining what they were as he was doing it.

Mikkel had just handed the list back to Emil when Reynir emerged from the tank, looking just as sleep-ruffled as Sigrun.

"Tuuri said we have to walk now," he said around a yawn, "Can I help with the preparations?"

"You could come with us," Emil offered, "We'll have to carry a lot of junk, another pair of hands would be useful."

"No," Mikkel cut him off before Reynir could utter a word, "You're going into the outskirts of a former city. You're not immune. You can help me wrap up these books for transport."

"But Mikkel, it's daylight!" Reynir protested, "And I'd have my mask and I'd be with Emil and Lalli! They wouldn't let me get hurt!"

"As touching as your trust in their abilities to protect you is," Mikkel sounded even more unimpressed than before, "Accidents happen. Last time it was Sigrun's arm. Next time it may be someone's throat. You're staying here."

Reynir flinched and then wilted like a drying flower at the accusation. And while Emil really didn't appreciate Mikkel's tone, the old Dane wasn't wrong. Reynir might have been another pair of helping hands, but he was also a liability. Still, Mikkel could have phrased it a dozen different ways, but he'd chosen the one that would make Reynir feel too guilty to even think about going out. Just because Mikkel was stressed too didn't mean he had to be an ass about it, and Emil planned to tell him so.

He'd barely got the first syllable out when Lalli sighed in irritation and took it upon himself to literally push Reynir back into the tank. One the doors were all but slammed into Reynir's nose, he turned to Mikkel and nodded. Mikkel patted him on the shoulder in approval and went off towards the storage compartment.

"Okay, that was just mean," Emil chided him, but much milder than what he'd planned for Mikkel, "He was just trying to be helpful."

“I know,” Lalli growled, then pulled Emil along by his elbow, “And he will be *insufferable* if we leave him behind *now*. Give me a boost.”

“Er, okay?” Wonderful, even when he understood what Lalli was saying he had no idea what he was talking about. Nevertheless, he laced his fingers together and helped Lalli get up to the tank window. He stuck his head inside but didn’t actually go in.

“Tuuri!” Emil heard him whispering, “Tell the stupid one to come here and be quiet about it!”

“Uh, why?” Tuuri asked.

“Just do it.”

“Um, Reynir? Lalli said you should come to the window-”

“And come down here.”

“-and get down it. I’m confused, *why* are you going out the window?”

“Because,” Lalli stubbornly said.

“Oh!” Tuuri sounded excited, “You’re sneaking out! That’s so cool!”

“I’m pretty sure this counts as insubordination,” Emil said mostly to Lalli’s waist. He was ignored.

Message delivered, Lalli clambered down using Emil’s shoulders as a handhold, but once he was back on his feet he didn’t let go. He just looked at Emil’s eyes with downright uncomfortable intensity he hadn’t used since they were on the train to Mora. Was something about Emil’s eyes strange? Oh no, was Emil making him uncomfortable? Did he do something he shouldn’t have? He always put his foot in his mouth, what did he do now?

Uh, why was Lalli getting closer?

“Lalli, Emil?” Reynir asked, finally poking his head out the window, “What are you doing?”

“Mrrr,” Lalli grumbled at his arrival and let go of Emil, looking like he was praying for patience, “Mikkel is not looking. Do you want to come along or not?”

“Er, Lalli wants you to come along on the mission, without telling Mikkel,” Emil translated, still feeling a bit off-kilter, “Are you going?”

Lalli glared daggers at him, like Emil had inexcusably twisted his words, but Reynir smiled so hard his mask nearly went lopsided. He slipped out the window with grace Emil honestly hadn’t expected of him and landed on his feet, as quietly as Kitty.

“Great, let’s go!” Reynir barely kept his tone quiet, then proceeded to skip away.

In the wrong direction.

Once they’d managed to steer him back on track, they set out for the shopping district, careful to avoid Mikkel’s line of sight. He’d notice they disobeyed his orders, of course, but they planned to be long gone by that point. And Sigrun would absolve them if they came back enough useful stuff and with all of their limbs intact. Hell, she’d probably be proud of them for taking initiative.

On the way, Lalli was absolutely determined to be in a bad mood, but that didn't deter Reynir one bit. He seemed fascinated with everything they passed, even if it was just a particularly gnarled tree. Emil had warned him that they couldn't talk much, and especially not loudly, since you never know if there was some Beast with enough fur and hunger to try and take a bite out of them in broad daylight.

Reynir didn't seem to mind the silence, and other than a few excited gasps he didn't seek to break it. Emil kept half an eye on him, just in case he decided to wander off, but most of his attention was on his surroundings and Lalli.

Lalli was - there was no other word for it - *sulking*. He was dragging the bag Mikkell had given him and staring straight ahead with a mulish look on his face. Emil was positive that if his tail was showing, it would be lashing unhappily.

Emil wondered what he did to deserve it *this time*. Nothing was coming to mind but, as public school had aptly proven, he was fully capable of offending people without realising what he'd done. At least this time he hadn't gotten a bowlful of porridge to the face. And he still hadn't figured out what he'd done to deserve that, either!

Maybe he wasn't cut out for this friendship business...

He mentally slapped himself. That was quitter talk! Sigrun would have probably slapped him herself if she'd heard what he was thinking about! So he screwed up! Big deal! He could *talk* to Lalli now, he could actually *ask* him what he did wrong!

Right! He could and would do that!

...Aaaany second now.

Dammit Västerström, get it together, Emil privately told himself, took a deep breath, and lengthened his steps until he could reach Lalli and grab his hood.

"What?" Lalli asked, clearly still irritated.

Emil swallowed heavily, but soldiered on. "Did I do something? I mean... Are you mad at me?"

"Yes," Lalli bit out. Emil flinched back, just a little bit, but it was apparently enough.

Lalli's face fell. He sighed heavily and looked away with a hand rubbing the back of his neck. "No, not really. It's just-" he paused to glare at Emil some more, "You can be really stupid sometimes."

Okay, that was fair. It still didn't answer the question of *what* exactly did Emil do wrong, though.

"Emil," Lalli sounded alarmed, "Where is Reynir?"

Oh shit, Emil thought, his heart sinking down to his stomach as he turned around and saw that Reynir was *gone*.

They exchanged a quick, panicked look and *ran*. Dammit, if Reynir had so much as stubbed his toe Mikkell was going to kill both of them, and Sigrun wasn't even going to protest! If something worse than that happened, they might as well give up on going back to the camp. Mikkell would-

They found Reynir not ten meters away from the bend in the road, standing there like a complete idiot and staring at his boots.

“Reynir!” Emil called, probably louder than he should have, but he didn’t even care, “I thought we told you not to get separated!”

“Huh?” Reynir looked up, startled, “Oh, sorry. But,” he looked down at the snow again, “I think I saw this before, or something like it.”

“What, snow?” Emil asked, bewildered, “You mean to tell me you, an Icelandic, never saw snow before?”

He could hear Lalli snickering from behind. Reynir glared at him.

“Not snow, the tracks! I think I saw them in a vision!”

“A vision?”

“Yes! Look!” Reynir crouched down, “It was a lot like this, a deep ridge in the snow with two sets of footsteps on either side. But the trail where Lalli was dragging his bag was a lot wider, and it wasn’t his footsteps on the left.”

Lalli, who suddenly sobered up at the word ‘vision’, crouched down beside Reynir, trying to see what he was seeing. “What did he say?”

Emil dutifully translated, which was still a little weird since to him it seemed like he was just quoting Reynir verbatim. Lalli nodded and went back to studying the tracks.

“Was there anything else?” Emil asked.

“Yeah,” Reynir pointed at the empty space to the left of Lalli’s footsteps, “Dog was walking here, and I could see his tracks as well. And then he turned to the left, stopped, asked if he’s done a good job, and disappeared.”

“You think he wanted to show you something?” Emil wondered, “Duchess did stuff like that sometimes. Back when she was alive, I mean, when she wanted me to open doors for her. You think this is like that?”

“Maybe,” Reynir got up, “But I don’t know what he was trying to show me.”

“And you saw nothing else? Where those tracks were? Who else made them?”

“No.”

Emil looked down at the snow, not sure what the vision was about either. “Are you sure you weren’t just dreaming?”

“No,” Reynir was more insistent this time, “I don’t really dream. When I go to sleep, I either wake up on the Dreamsea or in the morning. Before I came to the Silent World I didn’t dream at all.”

Well, it was certainly a point towards it being a vision. “Alright, you probably did see the future then. But maybe what it was trying to show you just hasn’t happened yet?”

“...probably,” Reynir muttered and looked at the tracks again, “I think the footsteps on the right were yours, though. They look the same.”

“But the left ones weren’t Lalli’s?”

“No,” Reynir sighed, “I don’t know, I guess I’ll know it when I see it. We are going to be walking a lot until we reach the outpost.”

“True,” Emil turned around and continued down the path, “And in the meantime, we should probably get the stuff Mikkell needs.”

That was the end of it. The conversation made Lalli perk up again, at least. Emil filled him in on Reynir’s side of the conversation, but his only contribution was to nod sagely.

“It was a message from his god. It means we are going in the right direction,” was the only thing Lalli had to say on the matter.

It was as easy for him as it was for Tuuri, to trust that the deities they’d never even heard of would lead their faithful down the right path. Emil would have asked him how he could be so sure, but he had a feeling all he would get in return was that same bewildered look Tuuri gave him.

They are gods, Emil. If they don’t know what they’re doing, we have bigger problems on our hands.

Freya said there was a plan in place. Hopefully it included getting all of them out of the Silent World alive and at mostly unharmed. Freya, at least, had gone to a lot of trouble to save Emil, the moment he actually asked for it. It stood to reason that there really was someone over there looking out for them.

Well... He’d gone into the Silent World with far less than that. If they actually got back, there was probably some kind of temple to Freya in Iceland that had priests who could answer his questions. Hopefully at least one of them would be as nice as Old Lady Pastor.

Once they got to the shopping district, Emil showed them the list and told them to just gather junk that looked like it, then they could sort out which would actually be useful.

Emil nearly went off before Lalli bonked him over the head with a plastic jug, which was incidentally right what he was looking for. They stuffed the ones that didn’t have any leaks into the bag and continued on.

They found a row of wheelbarrows a few isles down. They were rusty and covered with gross stuff, but no actual Grossling stuff. There was one that even had an intact tire, if deflated.

And next to it, a little white flower, blooming under a shelter of broken glass that redirected a bit of sunlight right over it.

Emil smiled.

Footsteps made him turn around. Both Reynir and Lalli had their arms full of various stuff and were holding it all out for inspection.

“This is not a tent,” Emil took an old umbrella off the pile. It had some rather obvious teeth marks right in the middle of it, so it wasn’t going to be useful either way. He moved a bucket and an old basket until he found a pack with a drawing similar to the one Mikkell made on the paper. “I guess this is. Okay, we’re taking it. What’s next?”

Reynir’s haul yielded a lot of junk but also some sleeping bags and even a thick comforter vacuum-sealed into plastic. Emil vaguely remembered from his Cleanser days that stuff could last for centuries and everyone had to wear masks when burning it, so it had probably preserved the comforter as well. Emil put them all in the wheelbarrow.

“Well, we have everything we came for. Great job, guys!”

“Yes!” Reynir cheered quietly. Lalli, on the other hand, looked worried.

“What’s wrong?” Emil asked. If the scout was worried that was usually the first sign of danger, “Are there any Grosslings close?”

“No,” Lalli quickly said, but his expression did not abate, “Your eyes are still glowing.”

“Uh, yes?” Emil was confused. He’d been able to understand both Lalli and Reynir the entire time, so he figured they were, “Is something wrong with them? I mean besides the fact that I look like I have a lightbulb in my head.”

Reynir snickered into his hand. Lalli didn’t look amused.

“It’s never lasted this long before,” he tilted his head, “When did it start?”

“Hmm,” Emil thought back, “Around the time the engine exploded, or maybe a bit before. I don’t know, I didn’t notice the difference until Tuuri pointed it out.”

“And you feel okay?”

“Yeah. No headache or anything.”

“And the ghosts?”

“Still in here,” Emil tapped his temple briefly, “I can hear them faintly if I focus, but most of the time I forget they’re even there. They’re pretty docile.”

Lalli, if anything, looked even more disturbed.

“That’s kinda’ weird,” Reynir said, “That they’re so calm you don’t even notice them, I mean.”

“Well they *are* cats right now,” Emil shrugged, “Pretty much all the cats need is food, a warm place to sleep and someone to pet them and they’re happy. I don’t really see the reason they’d be unsettled.”

Reynir and Lalli exchanged worried and somewhat disbelieving looks at that.

“What?” Emil asked defensively.

“You didn’t see them when they were following us,” Reynir said, quiet and subdued, “Or when one attacked the tank. It wanted to kill us. It wanted us to *suffer*. I had a vision of what would have happened if they’d succeeded, and-” he shivered before he got the word out, “It was... painful.”

They stood there in silence, unsure what to do. It was strange to think about, that the weird, deformed cats were actually the same beings that had driven Trolls to attack them and nearly killed Emil. That them being all in Emil’s head was a very good reason to doubt his chances of survival, and that he was technically still in danger as long as they were there.

Emil did know that. He just... Preferred not to think about it.

“But, anyway, I don’t think they’re the reason my eyes are still glowing,” Emil tried to get the conversation back on track, “Maybe it’s just because I’ve been talking to you? We wouldn’t understand each other if they weren’t.”

“Mrrr,” Lalli didn’t sound happy about that hypothesis.

“Look, I feel fine,” Emil assured him, “So there’s probably nothing wrong.”

“Mrrr,” Lalli glared at him, “How can you be so careless?”

“Uh?” Emil could only blink at the sudden change in tone.

“You were in a *coma*. For a *week*,” Lalli was positively growling. Reynir took a step away from him, “There are *vengeful spirits* in your *head*. Do you even understand what would have happened to you if you goddess hadn’t interfered?!”

“Lalli, calm down,” Emil kept his voice gentle and calm. What was wrong with him?

“Onni is going to try to kill you!” Lalli yelled in his face.

“Wh-what?!”

“I don’t know if he can, but I know he will try!” Lalli gritted his teeth, still glaring at him, “I know he will, because he told me to kill you before you woke up.”

“He *what*?!”

“What’s going on?” Reynir fretted from the sidelines, “Emil, what is he saying?”

“He thought you were going to turn into a Kade,” Lalli ignored him, “A Turned Mage. Soul Stealer. Like the one that killed nearly half of Saimaa. That took our grandmother. He is afraid you are going to turn the same.”

“A Kade?” Emil asked, latching onto the first vaguely familiar word, “That thing Reynir called me when I first woke up?”

“Huh?” Reynir, for his part, looked even more confused, “But you’re not a Kade.”

“I don’t even know what that is!”

“It doesn’t matter!” Lalli screamed, “Onni thinks you are, and he won’t stop just because you tell me not to do it! You need to be careful until those ghosts are gone or you could die!”

“Lalli, shhhhh!” Emil put his hands up, not sure how to calm him down, “You need to be quiet! You’ll wake something up!”

That did snap Lalli out of it, but it didn’t make him any calmer. It just left him nearly shaking with repressed rage, glaring daggers at Emil. Quick as lightning, Lalli grabbed him by the front of his coat and pulled him close, his pointy little nose nearly brushing against Emil’s.

Emil didn’t dare breathe.

“If you die, I will *never* forgive you,” Lalli whispered, the threat clear in his voice.

And Emil... Felt something deep in his stomach, something wild and unsettling. Something that wasn’t fear, but just as exhilarating and just as shaking.

Before Emil could do something unforgivably stupid, like *leaning closer*, Lalli released him and stomped away.

Emil stood there for a moment, trying to remember how to use words.

Reynir's gasp finally broke him out of his stupor. The ridiculous Icelandic was gaping like an idiot behind his mask, eyes wide enough that Emil could see white all around his irises. For some reason he was alternately pointing at Emil and Lalli's retreating back.

"What?" Emil bit out. His face felt hot for some reason.

"You!" Reynir squeaked, "Him!"

"*What?*" Emil repeated. Was the evening fever coming? Emil was pretty sure they hadn't wasted that much time here.

"Did what I think just happened happen!?"

Emil would have dearly liked for at least one person to make sense today, but alas. "Considering *I* have no idea what just happened, I really can't answer that."

Reynir was still gaping like an idiot. Emil sighed and took the handles of the wheelbarrow. "Come on, we have to get back to the camp before sundown. And, uh, I think we need to talk when we can all understand each other."

"Ah, right, camp," Reynir snapped his jaw shut and shook his head slightly, like he was trying to clear his thoughts manually. He walked away, vaguely in the direction Lalli had gone.

Emil heaved up the wheelbarrow on its single wheel, but was stopped by a dull 'thump'.

The piece of glass on the floor had fallen over the little flower.

Emil stared at it for a moment before lowering the handles back down. He knelt by the flower and gently lifted the glass back up. Luckily something had stopped its fall, so it only bent the flower almost to the floor but didn't actually squish it. Emil gently eased the flower back to a mostly standing position.

It sprung back up, a little bent over, but its stem intact, not broken.

"There you go," Emil whispered, "Keep up the good job, little flower."

Flower encouraged and his business done, Emil took up the wheelbarrow again and followed their trail back to camp.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, Emil, whatEVER could be going through Lalli's head? We shall never know...

Anyway, in the canon timeline, this is about the time when Tuuri dies, and everyone is just waiting for it to happen, which is a vastly different atmosphere than the one here, so I couldn't just skip it. We are also ever so slowly approaching the apex of this plot, and at this pace, we might even reach it in a few chapters!

...I should just tag this as Slow Burn by now, shouldn't I?

Also, the obvious ending metaphor is obvious.

Edit: I just saw that this is now my second longest work. Remember when this was supposed to be 15k long? Yeah, me neither.

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

A short Mikkel interlude, wherein he flirts and ponders some more.

Chapter Notes

I'm procrastinating studying for my test and this is the result. Enjoy your breaks while I'm still giving them, plot is fast approaching.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Honestly, Mikkel wasn't even surprised when he came back into the office and found Reynir gone.

Were he a religious man, he would have looked to the heavens and prayed for patience. But seeing as he wasn't, and was blessed with a passel of raucous baby siblings, he calmly gathered the bowls he had come for and brought them outside, where their lunch was cooking. Sigrun was sitting by the fire with Kitty on her lap, ostensibly on guard duty. She did look better, thankfully, but she was still pale and the dark circles under her eyes were still prominent.

Her injury hadn't developed into sepsis as Mikkel had feared. The infection was going down slowly but surely, but now that she wasn't running on pure adrenaline anymore, the exhaustion and her compromised constitution were catching up with her. She had held up admirably since the Troll attack, mostly through sheer willpower, but collapsed off her feet almost the moment Emil was back on his, and had spent the last three days mostly asleep.

The rest had done her a world of good, though, and Mikkel was even starting to think she would be up to walking all the way to the port.

Possibly also cuffing some young misfits around the ear.

"Sigrun, I am starting to have a sinking feeling our children are stupid," he told their Captain.

"Pshht, of course they are!" Sigrun laughed, "They're kids! They'll grow out of it once their hormones and other gooeey junk settles. What did they do this time?"

"Lalli and Emil took Reynir with them to gather supplies," he said, ladling the stew into three bowls, "Right to the edge of an Old World town, and disobeying a direct order."

"Hmm, that doesn't sound like Twigs," Sigrun mused, "Did you specifically order either him or Emil, or did you just tell Braidy he's not going? He's a civilian, so direct orders have no weight to him."

Mikkel froze.

“Yep, thought so,” Sigrun stuffed a spoonful into her mouth, “Smart little weasel. I might have to snap him up as well. He should be useful after some proper training, even if he’s not immune.”

“...Do the rest of our teammates know you are planning to collect them like a set of knives?” Mikkel asked mildly, glad she didn’t linger on his little blunder. This was *not* how he envisioned this conversation going, might as well salvage what he could.

“Eh, they’ll figure it out,” Sigrun shrugged, “And they’re not exactly making it hard for me. Stubby and Freckles want to see the world, and there are no better sights than the Norwegian mountains! Emil has to learn this magic stuff, and they sure don’t teach that in Sweden. Pipsqueak will follow his soulmate and *ta-da!*” she waved her hand out dramatically, “I’ve got the whole set!”

“*I* don’t recall agreeing to that offer,” Mikkel rose an eyebrow.

Sigrun raised one back. “Are you refusing?”

“I haven’t decided yet.”

“That means you’re going,” Sigrun settled back in her chair, satisfied, “You’ve got no other jobs lined up, you’ve already said that. You don’t want to return to your family farm, and there’s always need for extra pair of working hands in my town,” she grinned mischievously, “Failing that, I’ll just knock you out and carry you home, and you’ll calmly resign to your fate in your usual fashion.”

“Ah, so we’ve reverted back to the old Viking tradition of marriage by capture,” Mikkel rolled his eyes, but he couldn’t entirely suppress his smile, “And here I was hoping I would be wed honourably.”

“Hey, I haven’t ravished you *yet*, have I?” Sigrun puffed up her chest, “I have been the soul of honour! I’ve promised to keep my hands to myself until we’re back to civilisation, and until I have wined and dined you properly. Once that’s done, though, I expect to see some skin.”

“I am blushing to the tips of my hair,” Mikkel said dryly, “Also, remind me to introduce to to a certain [Danish wedding song](#) when we get back. I think you’ll find it enlightening.”

“Why don’t you sing it for me right now?” Sigrun suggested, or more likely demanded, knowing her, mouth stretched in a lecherous smirk.

Mikkel smirked back. “It’s a wedding song. If you want to hear *me* sing it, you’ll have to marry me first.”

Sigrun didn’t get a chance to reply. The words were no sooner out of Mikkel’s mouth when Tuuri, who nobody had seen approaching, dropped the books with a startled ‘eeeeep’.

“I’m sorry for intruding!” she quickly bent to gather her books, “Don’t mind me, I was just- nothing! No help needed here, no sir! I’ll go back to packing these, *quietly* ! Byehavefun!”

She left so fast she nearly left an afterimage.

Sigrun stared after her for a long, long second, then burst into raucous laughter.

“Well, at least the kids will have something to talk about *now!*” she said loud enough for all the Silent World to hear, “True, not the love affair I’d been *hoping* they’d be talking about, but I suppose you take your entertainment where you can get it.”

Mikkel sighed like a long-suffering not-quite-parent-more-of-a-permanent-babysitter he could never escape being.

“Speaking of,” Sigrun put aside her almost-empty bowl, “You think those two are any closer to realising they’re head over heels for each other?”

Tuuri, hidden rather ineffectively behind the tank door, didn’t manage to stifle her gasp in time. Ah, children. So obvious even when they were doing their best to be subtle. Mikkel sometimes wondered if they thought adults went blind at some point.

Sigrun was clearly aware of their little interloper as well, so Mikkel decided to follow her lead and ignore her. “Possibly. I did send them off together to gather supplies, but seeing as they took Reynir with them, I do not have a lot of faith in the effectiveness of that plan.”

Sigrun pouted at that. “Ah, *dritt*. I really need to teach my Little Viking the importance of not missing your opportunities. If he remains oblivious any longer, Twigs is going to give up on him!”

“That sounds rather unlikely.”

“I don’t mean they’d stop being friends, I mean they’d *stay* just friends! Those two are totally made for each other, I’m not letting them just keep their heads shoved up their asses forever.”

“A stunning visual,” Mikkel dryly complimented her, “And what exactly are you planning to do? Shove their faces together and yell ‘now kiss!’?”

“I’m keeping it as a third last resort,” Sigrun nodded decisively, “If they don’t get it after *that*, I’m skipping to the last resort immediately.”

“Dare I ask what it is?”

“Getting them drunk and shoving them in bed together,” Sigrun said bluntly. Over in the tank, Tuuri could be heard choking faintly.

Mikkel had to press the back of his hand against his mouth to muffle any sounds that might want to escape. Poor Tuuri, Sigrun was really piling it up. If they continued this, and knowing Sigrun, she just might, Tuuri was going to get as close to exploding as a human possibly could.

Mikkel finally took pity on her. “I’m sure they will figure it out on their own soon. In the quarantine, at least. There’s hardly going to be anything to do other than *talk*.”

“Uh, I’d say I have more faith in my Right Hand Warrior, but,” she made a disgruntled face, “When it comes to this, I really don’t. Seriously, you’d think a pretty boy like him would be more used to people liking him.”

That... Had occurred to Mikkel as well. Though he suspected Sigrun hadn’t quite meant it the way she actually said it, it was still true: Emil, quite simply, didn’t really know what to do with people who actually liked him, romantically or otherwise.

“Ugh, I’m going to lie down for a bit more,” Sigrun stretched and went back to the tank, “This might be my last chance to catch up on my sleep, I’m not missing it.”

“Good idea,” Mikkel said, “I’m going to do the dishes.”

Sigrun waved a dismissive hand and disappeared. Eventually, Tuuri sneaked out of her hiding spot and went about her actual duties.

Meanwhile, Mikkel had nothing better to do than wash the dishes and think. Whether or not she'd intended to, Sigrun had given him quite a bit of food for thought.

Mikkel knew he'd given the impression of disliking Emil, especially in the beginning. The boy was arrogant and prone to putting his foot in his mouth, and considering what Mikkel was used to retaliating with, the face-cancer scare had been pretty mild.

It did the trick, though. Emil had immediately fallen in line. When Mikkel bothered to give him orders, they were obeyed promptly and mostly without cheek. In fact, in the three months they'd been in the Silent World, Mikkel could not think of a single order Emil had outright disobeyed until today. He didn't complain about Mikkel's cooking, about decontamination, about having to dig the latrine, or about having to haul equipment when setting up the camp. If he did complain, he made sure it was only to himself and under his breath.

A true military man, Mikkel would have thought, had it not been for the other side of the coin.

Sigrun had singled him out and immediately took him under her wing. Emil was happy and enthusiastic about that, clearly, but he also didn't really know what to do about it. He was awkward and unsure at the first sign of genuine praise, even as he did his best to get more of it.

Then, once Sigrun solidly placed her favor upon Emil and made a show of dismissing Mikkel, he'd expected the arrogant boy to gloat or hold it over him in revenge. Emil never did, though, just continued to treat him as a military superior, and eventually an amiable colleague. Any grudges he had, he let go of admirably.

It sent Mikkel's instincts tingling, that a boy that had been in the military for barely two years knew exactly what to do around superiors who disliked him or didn't think much of him, but did not know how to deal with those that did. That was the behavior of someone who was used to being disliked for far longer than just two years. That was the behavior of someone who very much *wanted* and *tried* to be liked, but did not have high hopes of actually achieving it.

And if the picture Mikkel had painted was true, it would go a long way in explaining why Emil hadn't caught on to the youngest Hotakainen's advances.

If he was so unused to people liking him, it was little wonder he didn't know what to do with someone who was in love with him.

Perhaps Sigrun's idea of pushing their faces together had some merit after all. Unfortunately, as entertaining as that would be, Mikkel found himself wanting that relationship to actually work, so it would be better if he actually talked to Emil first.

And, if Tuuri's behavior was any indication, he'd have some help on the other side as well.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, that's a real Danish folk song, and yes I could have linked a better source for it, but that is how I found out about it, and therefore it shall be how you find out about it.

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Lalli fell back to his usual method of dealing with stupid people who played with their lives needlessly: ignoring them.

He could hear Emil filling Reynir in on the part of the conversation he missed because he was a stupid foreigner and didn't know Suomi. Stupid Reynir even had the gall to be surprised that Onni would do something like that, even though that was the very first thing Onni had told them to do. Did he think Onni would forget? Or change his mind just because Lalli said so? Or was the stupid Icelandic really that naive and sheltered that he had no idea what kind of danger Onni thought they were in? What kind of danger they most certainly *were* in?

Maybe he really was. Stupid, trusting Icelandic, he was even worse than the stupid, ignorant Swede. Just how was Lalli supposed to keep them alive on his own?

When they came back to the camp, Tuuri came shooting out of the back of the tank with an excited look on her face, which was simply too much for Lalli to handle right now. Tuuri's excited voice, high and loud and *grating*, was a trial on a good day. Right now, Lalli had neither the patience nor energy for tolerating it, and he did not plan to.

"Lalli!" Tuuri called as she jogged over, "Oh my gods, you will not believe what I just-!"

"Mrrrr," Lalli growled and slapped his hands over his ears, "I'm going scouting."

"What?" Tuuri sounded taken aback, "But- Lalli!"

Lalli was already running.

The world seemed much more quiet when he was running. Like Tuulikki, the goddess of breeze and nature, the one his mother was named in honour of, cast her winds around him and blew all the noise away. As long as he was running, there was just him and the earth and the wind, and no Troll or Beast or spirit could catch him.

If he could, he would never stop running.

Eventually he reached the sea and was forced to stop. The cold water lapped at his ankles in gentle waves, cooling his skin even through the waterproof leather of his boots. It smelled *salty*. How weird. Lalli knew the ocean was a different kind of water than the lakes and rivers of Vellamo, and different from the unreal Dreamsea, but it was another thing to *feel* it with his own senses, to stand in it. Lalli took a deep breath, then kept taking it until his lungs felt like they would burst.

For the moment, he could hear nothing but the gentle shifts of the ocean. A strange thought came to him then.

Is this what Tuonela is like?

The quiet. The peace. The vast, endless Dreamsea and its drowning deep that kept all the souls of those who passed. If he failed, would this be waiting for him? The eternal sleep of the dead, safe under the guard of Tuoni and Tuonetar. Never again bothered by the fear of being ripped apart by

Trolls, of the Kade lurking in mists of his dreams, never bothered by the tedium of noise and people and paperwork.

Never bothered by strange foreigners who couldn't even control their own powers.

His lungs hurt. Lalli's breath escaped him like a frightened rabbit, and his heart pounded in his chest hard enough to break through. Every next breath he took *hurt*. There was dread at his very core and it felt like it was eating away at him.

How could a single thought be so alluring and so frightening at the same time?

Lalli's breathing sped up.

That is exactly what will happen if I fail.

When he died, the Swan would collect him and take him away, far away from the Earth. Lalli had made peace with that truth from a very young age, as all children of Saimaa were taught. Death was inescapable, and a far better fate than the alternative. Grandmother, especially, had made sure he knew what life and death entailed, and had warned him never to stray from the Bird's Path upon his life's end.

But what happened when a foreigner died? Onni had once called their gods strange and cruel, where would they send their own dead?

What would happen to Emil if Lalli failed to protect him?

Only one thing was for certain: Lalli would never see him again.

"No," Lalli breathed out, mist clouding his fear, "*No.*"

"No what?"

Lalli whipped around, startled. Emil slowly put his hands up in a gesture of surrender.

"Sorry, I thought you'd heard me coming," he apologised, "Uh, you've been gone for a while, are you alright?"

"...I'm fine," Lalli murmured, looking away. What was he even supposed to say?

He could see Emil biting his lip from the corner of his eye. The Swede looked like he wanted to say something but nothing was coming out.

It reminded Lalli of the time when he was trying so hard to learn Finnish but was never sure of himself enough to get a proper word out. In the end, he just sighed in defeat and took Lalli's hand.

"Uh, we're supposed to be goin- Heavens, Lalli, you're freezing!"

Lalli blinked. Oh, yeah, he supposed it was a bit too cold to be just standing ankle deep in the sea without moving. His legs felt stiff, and he couldn't feel his fingers and toes. Well, he'd been worse, he'd warm up on the way ba-

Emil was hugging him.

Lalli's brain froze along with his body. Emil's arms were around him and his entire torso was pressed against Lalli's. Broad palms rubbed his back in an effort to warm him up, and one settled on the nape of his neck.

Emil breathed, and his breath felt like the summer winds on Lalli's skin.

Was he really doing it with perfectly pure intentions in mind? Was Lalli really the only one who felt it? The connection, the attraction? He'd thought- Well, he'd *hoped* Emil felt it too, but no matter how he tried to show it, the Swede just looked either confused or embarrassed. Never giving Lalli an answer either way, even now that the answer could be understood.

Maybe Lalli was wrong. He usually was about other people. He'd thought Emil was different, but- No, he definitely was different. Emil was kind to everybody, even Beasts, because his heart really was so big and open.

Lalli wasn't special. He just fell under the category of 'everybody'.

He should give up hoping while he still could.

"Hey, you okay?" Emil took Lalli's hands in his and rubbed his fingers gently, slowly massaging warmth and feeling back into them, "We should go back. We need to start walking now if we want to find proper shelter before nightfall."

Lalli nodded but didn't move. His body felt warm again from Emil's ministrations, but he stayed rooted to the spot. Like he could pretend, just for a minute longer, that the real world was not waiting out there, wasn't about to swallow him whole.

Emil blew out a gust of air that tickled Lalli's face. It felt like standing in the warm wind.

"You know," for some reason, Emil's tone was almost conversational, "You actually remind me of a cat very much."

Lalli finally looked at him just so he could glare at the stupid Swede. Who was, for some stupid reason, smiling.

"Yep. So much that I sometimes have to remind myself that you probably wouldn't appreciate being treated like a cat. And then it turns out maybe it would have been better if I'd been reminding myself a bit less. But like you said, I can be rather stupid sometimes."

The stupid Swede was making less and less sense by the minute. Lalli was just getting really annoyed with him when, blushing pink to the roots of his hair, Emil took him by the shoulders and rubbed his cheek against Lalli's. It wasn't just a quick swipe, either. It was slow, firm *rub*. The corner of his mouth brushed against Lalli's, the friction of skin with a hint of stubble scratching him all the way to his ear.

Now, Lalli stood frozen to the spot for a reason that had nothing to do with the temperature.

"Lalli?" Emil asked plaintively, "Please say something."

He couldn't. His tongue felt glued to the roof of his mouth. His face was on fire. He knew he had to give an answer, now that he knew his feelings were reciprocated, but he couldn't *think of anything to say!*

Emil was starting to look worried, and the worry was quickly morphing into panic. He stuttered, clearly trying to form some sort of apology, because *he'd clearly misunderstood what Lalli's silence meant and-*

He had to do it. He wasn't going to get another chance.

So he surged forward, closed his eyes, and pressed his lips to Emil's.

It was bad. Their noses were bumping. Emil was startled, and hadn't yet gathered his wits enough to kiss back. But then-

But then Emil's hand cupped the back of Lalli's neck, tilted his head, his lips parted slightly, and *he kissed him back.*

And then it was... *good.*

Lalli had never done something like that before, but he'd seen other people. Couples kissing before or after a mission. Other scouts bringing various people around the barracks and devouring each other's mouths against the wall. The strange noises he sometimes heard from his neighbours. He knew what they all meant, but he'd never understood the appeal. He didn't know why people bothered.

He thought he understood now.

Emil kissed him again, slow and chaste, just switching a bit to the left, but he wasn't *stopping*, and Lalli wasn't sure he ever wanted him to stop, because he was so warm and so *Emil*, and he *liked him back.*

Lalli wondered if he was feeling lightheaded from sheer euphoria or because he was running out of air.

Eventually, they had to break apart to breathe, puffing out misty clouds into each other's faces. Emil's cheeks were as red as his parted lips, and his eyes-

His eyes were glittering pink, glowing bright enough that Lalli had trouble looking at them.

It was a sobering reminder of where they were, and the danger they were in.

"We have to go," Lalli breathed out, "The others are waiting for us."

"Ah, uh, yeah," Emil fumbled a little, letting go of Lalli in the process. He did his best not to murr in discontent at that.

When Lalli finally moved his feet, he found out that part of the reason he hadn't been able to move was because his feet had sunk into the sand. Just how long had he been out here?

"Are you still cold?" Emil asked quietly.

Lalli wiggled his toes inside his boots, expecting them to be numb with cold, but they weren't. In fact, he felt warmer than he did cocooned in a blanket next to the tank's heater, even though he'd been standing in the cold wind and sea for over an hour.

He looked Emil in the eyes, the glittering pink glow fading back into luminous purple, and wondered if they had truly guessed the third gift of Emil's goddess.

But... Emil was patting his shoulder and smiling at him. And he'd *kissed* him.

He could worry about the danger come nightfall. Right now, Lalli decided to let himself be happy. If only for a moment.

Sigrun did her very bestest not to grin like a loon when her Little Viking returned with their wayward scout, both of them blushing like a pair of virgin brides.

There was no power on this Earth or beyond, though, that could stop her from elbowing Mikkel in the side and wiggling her eyebrows knowingly.

Mikkel, in his usual fashion, heaved a long-suffering sigh. "Alright, I admit, your plan worked."

"Ha!"

"Though I do believe it was *my* idea to simply try talking to them first."

"Doesn't count if I did the talking!"

"I admit you've done it in a distinctly 'you' fashion."

That was Mikkel-talk for saying she was awesome and her plan had gone *perfectly*.

Mikkel's idea was to sit Emil down and basically give him the sex talk, as if her Right Hand Warrior needed it. Mikkel was usually a smart guy, but sometimes he missed the point of the problem so hard she had to wonder. Sigrun put a stop to that fast, though, and dealt with it swiftly and effectively.

She called Emil over, squished his adorable little cheeks between her hands to make sure he was looking at her and not at his shoes, and told him loud and clear:

"You are head over heels for Lalli, and he's stupidly in love with you. So you are going to go after him and tell him that, or Thor help me, I'm going to lock you two in the tank until you sort your shit out. That's an order, soldier."

Emil had, predictably, spluttered and stammered and nearly melted into a puddle, but Sigrun had slapped him on the back heartily to discourage any protests. "Trust me, Emil. When have I lied to you or let you down, hm? Exactly, never. Now go and get your man!"

And Emil, the obedient little soldier he was, nodded in a daze and stumbled off vaguely in the direction he'd seen the scout go.

They'd returned rosy-cheeked about an hour later, shooting each other longing glances.

Ah, young love. Sigrun fully expected to be thanked in the wedding speech.

"Well, now that the soap opera part of this trip is over," Mikkel said, eyeing Tuuri as she squealed and hugged her cousin with joy, "We need to get going soon."

"Yes, yes," Sigrun stretched her stiff limbs, "I'm feeling loads better now. What am I packing?"

"Nothing," Mikkel was firm, "You will be our guard. Your job is to be on the lookout, ready to shoot any surprise attackers."

Sigrun could just look at him blankly. Had he gone mad? “That’s the scout’s job.”

“Do you really think our scout is up to the task right now?”

Sigrun looked at Lalli. Admittedly, he was mostly occupied by fending Tuuri off and sneaking glances at Emil, who was being harassed in a similar capacity by Reynir.

“You wanted them to have something to talk about,” Mikkell continued, “Now it seems they will be doing little else. I need someone with a clear head on their shoulders holding a gun. And I’m fairly certain some extra backpacks won’t impede their ability to gossip any.”

Sigrun made a face. When he put it like that... “Maybe I should have waited until we got to the outpost.”

“Perhaps,” Mikkell said in that infuriatingly mild tone, “But as things stand now, there will be no stopping them anytime soon,” he smirked, “Or at least until their ‘hormones and other gooey junk’ settle. The only thing you can do now is carry Kitty and be the lookout.”

He was far too smug about this. Sigrun almost suspected this was some nefarious plot to make her take it easy even though she was *fine* now, almost back to full speed, but even Mikkell couldn’t have masterminded something like this.

Sigrun couldn’t entirely shake her doubts, though.

“Fine,” Sigrun conceded in the end, grabbed her rifle and the kitten, and slung them both over her shoulders, “Are the signal markers in the tank on?”

“Yes.”

“Then we’ve done all we can for it. It’s time to start trekking,” Sigrun turned around and whistled sharply, “Alright team, lets move while the moving is good!”

The kids jumped back to attention like startled cats, but they did jump to attention. Emil and Reynir hurried to put their packs on, Tuuri secured her bag and Lalli slung his rifle over his shoulders.

Satisfied that everyone was prepared, Mikkell took up the handles of the wheelbarrow and heaved it up with their loot and their supplies like it weighted nothing, and calmly started walking in the direction of a ruined bridge.

Sigrun followed, as did the rest of the them. As they walked, she took a moment to feel proud of her team. Despite every possible worst case scenario happening to them on this mission, which had been shoddily organised in the first place, they’d fulfilled their mission, come out of it all in one piece, and without even losing the civilian!

Real and proper Vikings, her kids were. The second they were back in the Known World, she was damn well drafting them into her unit. They were all coming home with her, and that was final.

She sneaked a smug peek at Mikkell. One way or another.

Hahahahahahahaha, finally, your prayers have been answered! But please do bear in mind the chapter count.

I wrote most of this while waiting for my Covid test results, and the first part kinda reflects my mood. And the second part reflects the relief when it came back negative. Sorry about the abrupt shift in tone, but eh, we got our baby himbos together. Finally. I'm the one writing this and I was getting impatient.

Also, I only realised how Lalli's mini soliloquy could sound when I reread it without the Covid test looming over my. Don't worry, Lalli's not suicidal, just lovesick and sleep deprived. And a little ~~sexually~~ frustrated .

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Emil tries to make some plans for the future. They are, of course, immediately dashed.

Chapter Notes

I'm aliiiiive! Anyone surprised?

Yeah, semester started and immediately put six bullets in my chest, but I'm aliiiiive!

Scuse the Zalgo, btw. Hopefully it's fully readable, but if it's not, it's not that important

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was a truth of life that disasters were inevitable. Seeing as they were living in what was left of the world after a literal apocalypse, the surviving inhabitants were well used to them.

Sometimes, disasters could even be polite. They came one after the other, giving their victims at least some time to catch their breaths, possibly even a few hours of sleep. If they were really polite, they happened months or even years apart.

And sometimes, they threw all decorum out the window and happened all at once.

Like today.

It started on a positive note, that day. With a kiss, no less. It continued a little less nicely, but still halfway decently, in Emil's optimistic opinion. He could do without the teasing, though.

As they were passing under a crumbling highway bridge, Lalli decided he'd had enough of human interaction and skipped on ahead, ostensibly to scout the way forward. Tuuri was left fruitlessly glaring at his back, but she knew better than to call after him, even in the daylight.

Seeing Lalli run away from her, Reynir decided maybe he could ease off from teasing Emil as well. With one last pat on the shoulder, he skipped off to talk with Tuuri, leaving Emil to blush to himself.

Mikkel and Sigrun had situated themselves solidly at the rear of their group, supposedly to guard their backs, though they were doing pretty much the same thing Tuuri and Reynir were. And since they were behind Emil they were free to point and giggle at his back as well.

In short, it was like public school all over again. Emil didn't blame Lalli one bit for running away.

But he decided against protesting. He *had* survived public school, when he was alone and the teasing was far more malicious than anything these people would dish out at him. He could let his friends

enjoy the gossip they'd been deprived of for three months on his account, and he could return the favor when-

He froze in the middle of the road. It wasn't until Sigrun nearly bumped into him that he started to move again. And think.

When... *what?*

Emil had almost forgotten. This wasn't the real world. It wasn't the way things were supposed to be. When they returned to the Known World, they would all go back to their normal lives. Sigrun would go back to Norway, Reynir's parents would probably never let him out of the house again, Tuuri would probably write a bestselling book in Finland, and Lalli-

Lalli would go back to Finland with her. He would go back home.

And Emil... wasn't sure he could do that.

No.

He was absolutely sure he couldn't return home.

He was a Guide now, whatever that meant in the grand scheme of things. He answered directly to a goddess that appeared in his dreams. He had ghosts of the Old World living as *cats* in his *head*. If he said even one of those things out loud back home, his Aunt and Uncle would laugh at best, have him committed to the Mora psychiatric ward at worst.

No. Emil could not go back home.

It was enough to dampen anyone's spirits.

But Emil hadn't made it this far on pessimism. Dwelling on bad thoughts wouldn't get him anywhere, he'd learned that years ago. It was time to ask a different question: What *could* he do?

Lately, most of his attention had been occupied by more immediate concerns. Like staying alive in the middle of the Silent World, trying to find a mystical shepherd to take care of the ghosts and figuring out that Lalli *liked him back*.

One of those things was more unbelievable than the other two, but all of them were true. If miracles like that could happen, then Emil could damn well continue going forward. One step after the other. Things had a way of sorting themselves out, as his aunt and uncle kept telling him.

But they could use a nudge in the right direction, too.

Mikkel had told him Trond had sent a letter to the Icelandic Academy of Seidur, to see if they had any idea what had happened to Emil, but he didn't have much hope they would find a solution to his... *problem*. If there even was one to be found.

...did he want one to be found? Also something to consider.

If it turned out he was stuck like this... Maybe he could follow Lalli back to Finland. He could speak Finnish now, technically, and they could always use Cleansers there, perhaps even mages. At least in Finland he wouldn't stick out like a sore thumb when his eyes started glowing.

And Lalli would be there. That was a very big point in the pro column.

But Tuuri said they worshipped different gods, and Emil was still fuzzy on where exactly were the boundaries of his new job. Freya said that gods might get jealous if you just mentioned more than one god in your prayers, even if they were from the same pantheon. If Freya did not want him to go to Finland now, where he'd be outside of her jurisdiction, she had more than enough power to stop him.

The thought sat ill in his stomach.

It reminded him of being stuck in his big house in Östersund, before Nanny was hired, all alone with only Duchess and the memories of his mother for company. Unable to leave Östersund until Östersund left him.

Emil shook his head to clear it. Right, no sense in dwelling on that, as Uncle Torbjörn said. Look forward, to the brighter things to come. If you only look backward, you will walk right past them without even knowing they were there. He had to remember to look *forward*.

But what else did he have to look forward *to*?

Let's see... He could ask Sigrun if she needed a mage in her unit. She liked him, and the way she talked during sparring he got the impression she wouldn't mind training him into a proper troll hunter. It would probably be more akin to torture than anything else, but Emil had survived the Cleanser boot camp when he was all fat and no muscle, *and* had managed to piss off every drill sergeant he came across. He could survive the Norwegian idea of hunter training as well, now that he had already completed the crash course. In the Silent World, no less. That ought to count for something, right?

It was probably his best shot, if Sigrun was willing to take him with her. Norway had mages that answered to Freya, military he could fit into, trolls he could hunt or guide, and-

He knew it was a long shot, but... maybe they needed a scout, too?

Assuming Lalli would want to leave his home and everything he'd ever known for Emil, who he'd only known for three months, and been- *dating* for three hours. Assuming Sigrun would even agree. Assuming Onni wouldn't kill him on the spot the moment he laid eyes on Emil, which Lalli seemed convinced was exactly what was going to happen. Assuming all of them even made it back to the *boat*.

Assuming *a lot* of things.

"Ugh," Emil grumbled to himself. All of the uncertainty was making his stomach hurt. And now that they were walking through the shade of an Old World buildings he was feeling kind of cold, too. He wrapped his arms around himself discreetly, in hope he could retain some

wārmth

in his body. And his upset stomach didn't really appreciate Mikkel's cooking, because there was a gnawing, twisting feeling of heartburn in his chest, and at the same time like he was

stuffed

but they couldn't stop yet. They still had to find a campsite before dark, before

the evening gales of the forest were cold and the fire was not yet lit

and the warmth of the fire was not yet felt

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“EMIL!!!”

Someone pulled him back by his collar so fast Emil nearly fell on his ass. He looked back, still dizzy with the force of the unexpected assault, to find Lalli looking at him with a frozen expression and his eyes very, very wide .

“You have to keep walking,” Lalli told him quietly, urgently, “Keep walking and don’t look at it.”

“Look at what?” Emil asked, completely thrown off kilter, “And when did you get back?”

“Keep walking,” Lalli grabbed his arm and pulled him along, staring stubbornly ahead.

“But, Lalli, what is it?” Emil turned around even as he was being pulled in the opposite direction. There were some strange, octopus-like trolls lurking in the shadows, but none of them looked very awake. And the voice sounded like it belonged to something *big*.

YOU
YOU CAN HEAR US

The sheer force of it sent Emil falling into the snow, clutching his head in absolute agony. Something rumbled in the distance, like a building collapsing, and someone was screaming and someone was trying to drag him away.

YŌŪ

ARERET HET WÄR M
ONRE

US

HETL

“Help...” Emil stuttered out, finally opening his eyes and *looking*.

It was a giant, the biggest one he’d ever seen, with a long, sinuous body with trashing tentacles connected to it without rhyme or reason. A dozen or so skulls were amassed into one bulbous point, malformed bone jaws open as if screaming. And inside it, or rather in the space its flesh occupied, were the *ghosts*.

Hungry, writhing, scared, borne of curse and agony and festering that had eaten away at anything that resembled humanity.

They were suffering.

And they were lashing out.

Emil had to help them.

“NO!!!” a voice that sounded like Lalli yelled, and suddenly he was slammed down into the snow on his back, Lalli’s hands over his ears and Lalli’s face looming over his.

“You can’t listen to them!” Lalli said to him, desperate, “You’re a mage now, but your mind is too open, too receptive. You can’t let them in and I can’t block them forever! You need to close off your mind!”

Emil could still hear them, screaming their desperate chant, but he couldn’t get up. He couldn’t move. Something was trashing inside his head, his chest was *burning*, and the cacophony of sounds even Lalli’s magic could block was ringing like a horrifying bell throughout his body.

It was agony, and he couldn't *move*.

Lalli’s eyes turned pleading, “I hear them too, I know what they’re asking, but they’re *lying*! Things like that cannot be helped. You need to trust me.”

Something... something about that got through the pain. The voice, or the sight of him, perhaps. Emil had never seen Lalli so afraid. He had never heard him raise his voice like that.

He never wanted Lalli to sound like that.

He took a deep breath, and focused on that. Focused his eyes on Lalli and not the ghosts.

Finally, sanity returned.

“Okay,” Emil said, swallowing heavily, “How do I do that?”

Lalli opened his mouth to say something, but he never got the chance.

A shadow fell over him, materialised into a tentacled troll, and knocked him away from Emil.

The moment Lalli’s hands and protection were away from his temples, the fire slammed into him.

When he opened his eyes he was back in his house, by the open window, and Östersund was burning.

The cats were calm, though, even facing their destruction. They were saying something, all at once, too low to hear. Whispering. The fire reached his window and gathered like a floating river in the room, not burning the house, but concentrating all energy, all the heat, into a single point. It’s target was clear.

Emil raised his hands, to block it or catch it, but he was too late.

The river of fire gathered into a spear and surged. It hit his heart and flowed into it, gathered inside like lava trying to contain itself in a clay vessel, heedless of his anguish.

But he had been here before, he had done it time and again. He knew what to do. As his heart inevitably cracked, and the fire leaked outside, it flowed through his veins, through his body.

He became the channel and the bedrock, and the fire flowed where he guided.

He opened his eyes again, looked at the octopus troll holding Lalli down, and commanded the fire to come.

It obeyed.

It surged from his heart into his veins, from his veins into his palms, and from his palms, *forward*.

A great gust of flames burst from him, bigger than from any flamethrower he ever held, and slammed into the troll. It shrieked in agony and rolled away from Lalli, writhing, but within seconds it had burned down to its bones. A moment later, and it was little more than a pile of ash in the snow.

Lalli lay there frozen, propped up on his elbows, and watched as it burned and died a final time.

“L-Lalli!” Emil called him, not daring to walk for fear of falling on his face again, “Are you hurt?”

Lalli turned to him slowly, his expression carefully unimpressed. “Of course you can do that,” he grumbled. Emil didn’t know how to interpret that, and at the moment, he didn’t care to try. He was just so glad that Lalli was okay.

But they couldn’t waste more than a second. Between Lalli holding him down and the fire coming to Emil, the giant had gotten distracted by something. Whatever it was, it couldn’t hold its attention forever.

It was turning back towards them again.

But this time, Emil had an idea.

First thing they teach you in any troll-slaying business: go for the head. The giants can be tricky that way, as they have multiple.

But this giant had put all of its head around its mouth.

“You want my help?” he asked, not bothering to raise his voice. He knew he would be heard. Turning around, he spread his arms wide in mocking invitation.

“Then *you* need to come to *me* .”

“Emil! What are you doing?” Lalli hissed behind him. “I told you you need to *block them*.”

“Lalli,” Emil said, not looking back, “This time, I need you to trust me.”

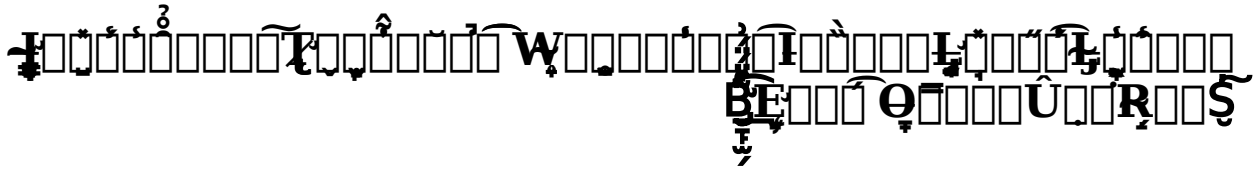
The giant slithered closer and closer, its gigantic mouth opening like a bird’s beak, or like a mockery of a loud grin.

Right towards Emil.

The fire surged through his veins again.

THAT
WENT AROUND RUMPTON HILL

The giant loomed over him, jaws gaping, set to devour.



“Of course,” Emil nodded, his very soul blazing with heat and light, *“The dead are always welcome to rest at the hearth.”*

He guided the fire, and the fire obeyed.

Far bigger than the first, the fire bloomed from his hands and devoured the devourer.

As the fire engulfed every nook and crevice of its mouth, the heads popped, the remnants of the brains inside them boiled away.

With the last of its strength and muscle control, the giant reared back, thrashing and screaming in its death throes. Its long, snakelike body undulated all along its length, tentacles hitting buildings on either side of it.

Emil kept feeding the fire for as long as it was in range. And even when it wasn’t, the flames continued to feed on the boiling flesh, and the dried rot on top of it.

It was still burning when the giant collapsed.

Its fall shook the earth like an explosion, the sheer force of it sending Emil flying backwards.

In his exhaustion, he passed out.

When he came to, he was back in his house. The three-headed cat that had taken such a shine to him sat next to his head, occasionally batting its paw on his nose.

“Did we win?” he asked deliriously.

“You did,” a vaguely familiar voice said, “You have completed your transformation.”

“My what?” Alright, this was too weird. Emil forced himself to sit up and see for himself what was going on.

Behind him on the floor sat Nanny, with Duchess sitting primly next to her. They were both smiling at him.

“You are now a true Guide,” Nanny said, “Well, almost.”

“Almost? What do you mean ‘almost’?” Dammit, Emil was too battered and exhausted to play riddles. With a groan he managed to force himself into a cross legged position.

Nanny turned her luminous pink eyes to the hearth. Ah, not Nanny then. Freya. That explained it.

“Emil,” she sounded solemn, “I have spoken with the Allfather.”

Allfather meant Odin, if he remembered Reynir’s tales correctly. The other god of magic. “And?”

“And we have reached the agreement that you should be told the whole truth.”

"The whole- You mean you lied to me?" Emil asked incredulously.

"At the time of our last conversation, no," Freya soothed, "I have never made a Guide by myself. I simply did not have the power to, at the time. As I could not make you a mage, I had thought to give you power similar to that of a true Guide, to be used in your lifetime and returned to me upon your death. But things have changed now."

"...how?" Emil was still suspicious. He had actually listened to most of Reynir's stories of the gods, and the many and varied examples of capriciousness in them did not inspire confidence. Even less now that Freya admitted that gods did not always tell the truth, and were just as likely to change their minds as humans.

"That remains to be seen yet," Freya admitted, "It is not solely my decision anymore."

"So what are you going to do?" he asked, "And can somebody tell me what this grand plan is? I'm tired of second guessing my every step."

"No," Freya was blunt.

"Why?!"

"Because it knots the string."

Emil looked at her incredulously.

Instead of answering directly, Freya rose a finger in the air. As she trailed it in a loop, it left behind a glowing string, "The future is continuously shaped by the actions and decisions you make in the present. Right now, you are going down the path Odin and I saw in Yimmir's Well. You are heading down the path of a future that holds a favourable outcome. But if your actions in the present can be influenced by the knowledge of the future..."

The glowing looped thread, which had been getting steadily more snarled, suddenly pulled. It left the string flat, with one grisly knot in the middle.

"...it knots the thread of time?" Emil ventured a guess.

"Yes," Freya nodded, and dissolved the string, "We can nudge the threads in the direction we want, show snippets of the future through visions. But we cannot meddle too much," she looked so impossibly sad, "More often than not, knowing the future ends up serving as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Trying to prevent what you saw, only for the horrible future to become your present precisely because you tried to change it."

Emil looked at her, at the goddess wearing the face of the woman who raised him, twisted in an expression of grief Nanny had never shown.

Something about that expression pierced through Emil's headache and straight into the part of his brain where epiphanies laid.

"What happened to you?" Emil blurted out.

Freya looked at him incredulously, but Emil had never really learned how not to put his foot in his mouth. Why learn now?

“You’re speaking from experience, aren’t you?” he pushed a bit more, but gently, “When you talked about a horrible outcome you tried to prevent, what was it? Maybe it could be fixed, or at least made better.”

Freya laughed. There wasn’t a trace of humour in it.

“So strange to hear a mortal say that, when you are living in the very reality we tried to prevent.”

Emil froze. Cold sweat gathered a his back. “What?”

Instead of answering, Freya stood up swiftly. “You’ve been here for too long already. Your friends are worried about you.”

“Wait!” Emil tried to stand up as well, only to find his legs glued to the ground.

“And I know this may not mean much to you, after what you heard,” Freya turned to him solemnly, “But don’t give up on the ones you lost so easily, either. Any of them.”

“WAIT!” Emil tried to stop her but he could feel himself fading, and the walls of his house were turning white. He shut his eyes tightly, trying to fight off the vertigo.

When he opened them again, he was still staring at white vastness. Except that this time, there were familiar faces staring down at him.

“Emil!” Reynir exclaimed with pure happiness, “Þú ert vakandi! Ég er svo ánægð að þú hafir það í lagi!”

“Wha?” he shut his eyes again, then rubbed them for good measure. His head was *killing him*. “Reynir, what are you talking about?”

“He said he’s really glad you’re alright,” Tuuri translated, her voice a little shaky, “We all are. Gosh Emil, you really need to stop scaring us all so much.”

Emil was still feeling awfully dizzy, and the conversation with Freya was slipping through his fingers like a fickle dream. He could only just remember something about transformation, and prophecies and... regret?

Gods , his head hurt.

“What happened?” he groaned.

Instead of answering, Lalli grabbed his hands and hauled him upwards. It did not help with the dizziness, so Emil tucked his head between his knees until the world stopped being so blurry.

“Emil,” Tuuri said hesitantly, “How much do you remember?”

“Little,” he admitted, “Fading fast. But I meant- Here? What happened here? Why does my head hurt so much?”

Lalli babbled something in Finnish. That was rather worrying.

Tuuri answered Lalli first, then turned to Emil. “Lalli said you used too much power and- Uh, that it knocked you out. Remember when he returned from scouting the Kastrup fort and then had to sleep

for three days? That's the result of magical exhaustion. You're in the same boat right now, and Lalli said it's a miracle you were only out for a few minutes."

"Ugh, I guess that also explains why I can't understand him anymore?" Emil asked.

"Probably. How are you feeling?"

"Head hurts."

"Well, *that's* probably because you were knocked backwards pretty far when the giant fell. Lalli caught you, mostly, but you still banged your head pretty bad. But other than that?"

"Like I'm gonna puke," he groaned, "Kinda dizzy. Ugh, but I'll be fine in a minute, not the first time I stood too close to an exploding building. Guh, just don't let Mikkel hear I said that."

Merciful silence followed his plea. Emil tried to piece together what happened right before his conversation with Freya in his mind. The giant was attacking, and it got into his head in a *bad way*. One octopus troll attacked Lalli and-

And the fire surged through his veins.

"Oh yeah, I'm a human flamethrower now," Emil said weakly, "Yaay. Sigrun's gonna be thrilled."

"A-ha," Tuuri tried to laugh and missed by a mile, "Yeah, a-about that."

Emil finally found the strength to look up. "What happened, is she okay?"

Tuuri looked stricken. She swallowed thickly, then looked somewhere to Emil's right.

Emil followed her gaze.

The body of the giant lay sprawled along the Old World street parts of it still burning, either from Emil's fire or from the sunlight. Emil followed its length with his eyes, until it ended with its tail submerged in the ocean previously hidden under ice.

And there, less than a dozen meters away from the edge, was the wheelbarrow, overturned and their supplies scattered.

There was no sign of Mikkel and Sigrun.

Chapter End Notes

Phew, a lot happens, huh? Thank gods that Emil is a positive guy, he'll get out of this okay.

...Right?

Anyway, you've got no idea how long I've been sitting on this reveal. Or how many times I've alsmot blurted it out to my friends. But I kept my silence, and I plan to reap my rewards.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Warning: A soldier intentionally staying behind to die so their comrades could get away

...let me know if there's a better way to tag that. Anyway, prepare for angst.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sigrun was hungry. Like, *really* hungry.

Mikkel assured her that was a good thing. If her body was craving food it meant that now it had blood to spare for digestion, or something like that. Then he offered her a bar of dry rations.

Sigrun was hungry, but not *that* hungry. She snatched the bar out of Mikkel's hand and stuffed it in her pocket before he could go off on a lecture.

That boat better have some decent food or she was going to start a mutiny *herself*.

"You know, I can actually hear your stomach growling," Mikkel said in that infuriatingly calm voice of his.

"I'll eat when we stop for the night," Sigrun grumbled in tune with her stomach. "I should be starving enough by then to eat that candle mash you call stew."

"Very well," Mikkel said agreeably and dropped the subject. Infuriating man.

So they meandered onwards, following the rest of the crew's backs, who were in turn following the scout's footprints in the snow. The kid had probably memorised the map three times over, so she felt pretty confident about their path.

Hopefully he had already found a safe camping spot. Kid was such an overachiever, so he probably had. Sigrun approved. If he found the all-important church in the process, Sigrun was getting him instated in her squad the moment they set foot in Iceland, and the gods could pry the little forest mage from her cold, dead fingers.

She doubted it would come to that. After all, she had the perfect bait for-

Something passed her mere inches from her nose.

"Deer?" she blurted out.

"Yes, honey?" Mikkel turned around, then spotted what Sigrun meant. "Oh."

It was a herd of deer trying to cross the street as quickly as possible, heedless of the strange humans trying to do the same.

With the prospect of venison on the horizon, Sigrun's stomach made the decision before her brain and common sense had been consulted.

The rifle was off her shoulder and her finger was on the trigger when the ground started to shake.

“The Hell-!?” She hadn’t even fired a single shot!

As it turned out, it wasn’t even her fault.

There was a giant.

Her incredulity did not fade as the giant completely ignored the daylight that must have been burning its skin off. It slithered out of the ground, sending the deer and the tentacled trolls scattering, but it ignored them completely. Instead, it was heading straight-

-for Emil.

Who wasn’t *moving*.

“Oh, fuck no!” Sigrun swore. Not her Little Viking, it won’t!

Years of training and experience taught her that they had very few and precious options against that thing, with the numbers and firearms they had. Hell, her rifle would barely be good enough as a toothpick to anything that big! So big, in fact, Sigrun could think of exactly one scenario that did not end up with all of them dead.

Just one.

Sigrun made that decision in less than a heartbeat.

Quick as a viper, she dove her hand deep into the wheelbarrow supplies, and pulled out a flare gun.

“Sigrun, what are you doing?!” Wow, Mikkel actually sounded worried there. He looked half a second away from tackling her to the ground to try and stop her.

She could understand why. He realised what she was trying to do. And had she been anyone but Sigrun Eide, this would be impossible.

Good thing she wasn’t.

“What I do best,” she grinned, then pointed the loaded gun at the oncoming giant, “Hey, ugly! Over here!”

She fired.

Naturally, she hit it right where it hurt. The red light of the flare burst right by its many heads, but it was protected from the worst of the damage by one of the triangular spikes protruding from its neck.

It swayed for a moment, dazed. She chanced a look at Emil, but Twigs had wrestled him to the ground and was holding him there. Stubby and Braid-head had proven to be the smartest so far and ran in the opposite direction from the giant.

Who turned its attention straight to her.

Her traitor heart skipped a beat. She told it to shut up.

After all, it was a glorious day to go to Valhalla.

“It’s been great knowing you,” she saluted with an easy grin, “But I’ll have to take a rain-check on that date.”

Mikkel looked at her with equal amounts of awe and horror on his face. Good. It meant he probably wouldn’t see *this* coming.

She grabbed the edge of the wheelbarrow with both hands, ignoring the burning in her injured arm, and *heaved*. It overturned like a fat cow and hit Mikkel straight in his balance point. They both toppled to the ground, hopefully out of the giant’s warpath.

And Thor himself must have seen her and approved, because the wheelbarrow had spilled a spare pack of Emil’s grenades right by her feet. She scooped it up and ran as fast as her long legs could carry her.

An instinct granted by the gods to people of the fjords told her that way lay the ocean. Hidden under the ice, but there.

With any luck, it would hold her just long enough.

The giant was advancing.

“Yeah!!!” she screamed at it, a rictus of a smile on her face, “Come and get me, you son of a bitch!”

She pulled the pin on one bullet-sized grenade, twisted mid-jump, and hurled it at the accursed fucking thing, then swerved sharply to the right.

She heard a blast and an enraged screech, so she must have hit at least one soft spot.

But she miscalculated. She had enacted her plan knowing the giant was long.

It retaliated by being *even longer*.

She was already at the pier when the damn thing’s tail end whipped into her midsection. It sent her flying like a ragdoll, *again*, then skidding in the soft snow.

“Uuugh,” Sigrun groaned, mouth full of snow. Damn, what was with these Danish trolls smacking her around like that? Now her good arm was bad too! Well, at least she landed on something...

...smooth.

Carefully, with slow movements, she swept away some of the snow, only to reveal deep ice underneath.

Well. At least she’d found the ocean.

Sigrun kept very, very still, then slowly turned her head back around. It seemed she’d skated pretty far away from land and she hadn’t sunk yet, maybe the ice was thick enough to support her weight for a while longer. As long as-

No, Sigrun thought in horror, *nonononono*.

The giant was turning around.

“Hey!!!” she struggled up to her knees, “You stupid bastard, you’re supposed to be coming after me! Heeeey!!!”

The ice cracked under her.

Shit, she thought. Thicker than she feared, but still thinner than she’d hoped. Thick enough to lay on it, but not enough to walk back to land.

She couldn’t go back. For her, this was the end of the journey.

Well then.

“Heh,” she smiled quietly, and sat back down on the crackling ice, “I suppose it serves me right, to run from Rán’s arms yet still end up in Aegir’s Hall. I wonder if they still have mead under the sea?”

As far as she was concerned, that was the only question that still needed to be answered. Because there was no doubt that Mikkell realised what she was doing and got the kids away from there while she distracted it. She had no idea what possessed that giant to walk around in broad daylight, but its strength ought to be sapped by now. Even if it had turned around, her team was long gone.

She *had* bought her team enough time to get away, of that she was sure. They ran, and they got away. She refused to believe anything else. Perhaps, if Rán was feeling generous, she’d allow Sigrun to follow the boat back to Iceland after she died. Just to make sure any sea beast wasn’t feeling too adventurous on their journey home.

If that was the last thing she could do, she’d-

“Sigrun!”

Her head snapped up at the sound of Mikkell’s voice. She saw him standing on the pier, looking wild-eyed, less than five meters away from one of the giant’s tentacles.

She paled.

“Mikkell, don’t-!”

She never got to finish.

Her words were swallowed by the scream of death. The tentacled snake giant writhed in pain from something, its long body undulating in one agonised wave.

Its tail rose, then fell.

Right onto the ice.

Sigrun didn’t even fully comprehend what happened, it was so fast. One moment she was watching the tail, the next she was airborne, and the one after that-

There was nothing but water.

As Sigrun was dying, because it couldn’t have been anything else, a strange thought passed through her head.

I really wish I got to try that venison.

Mikkel was not a good swimmer.

In Denmark, swimming in the ocean was heavily discouraged for immunes, and outright forbidden for non-immunes. He'd only learned after he joined the military, and even then he hadn't put much effort into being anything more than passable at it. In the water, he was very much out of his element, and would have preferred to stay out of it entirely.

It was amazing, however, what an excellent motivator a giant's tail heading straight for your head was.

Mikkel jumped, then dove through the ice.

The water exploded all around him. Mikkel stayed underwater even as he was pushed by the waves. Through the salt water, he could blurrily see the water getting dark from the giant's ichor.

Then the tides got their capricious hold on him, and pulled him away.

By sheer luck and perseverance, he managed to get his head above water properly, and spot a white shape topped with red being carried away by the waves.

It didn't seem to be moving on its own.

Mikkel might not have been a good swimmer, but that didn't stop him from finding new depths of strength and speed needed to *move*.

In what seemed like hours but couldn't have been more than a minute, he grabbed Sigrun's collar and pulled her closer. Her lips were blue and her skin pale. He couldn't tell if she was breathing.

He had to act quickly.

He pulled the knife from its holster at his belt and thrust it into the middle of the nearest ice float. One hand firmly on the handle, he heaved Sigrun on top of the iceberg with the other. The impact made her twitch and cough up water, groaning miserably. She sounded like she was fighting for every breath, but there was indeed breath in her lungs.

Mikkel was not very religious, but in the light of recent experiences, he thanked the gods nonetheless.

"Mikkel?" Sigrun squinted vaguely in his direction, "You... Stupid..."

"I'm well aware," Mikkel told her with admirably faked sanguinity, "You have my full permission to put me permanently on your mutiny list. In the meantime, I'll be here to make sure you're alive enough to do it."

Sigrun looked like she was going to say something else but was suddenly possessed by a coughing fit.

Mikkel grit his teeth tight to make sure they weren't chattering. One hand on the knife handle and the other on an indent in the ice, he heaved his upper body up onto the edge of the ice float. It tilted precariously, but not enough for Sigrun to fall off. Perfect.

The tides were taking them back towards the sea. Mikkel's best hope was to let it carry them and steer at an angle towards the land, before either of them got hypothermia.

Mikkel chose to consider it as excellent motivation to get some leg exercise.

It seemed like no force on this Earth was going to get Emil away from the shoreline. Actually, it seemed like he would have walked straight into the sea after them had Reynir not ran and pulled him back.

Reynir was crying again, and Tuuri looked like she was also considering another go at it. Emil looked too frozen in shock to even consider crying, and with his *Väki* depleted he understood Reynir about as well as Lalli did.

Lalli just felt stone cold dread in the pit of his stomach. He did his best to push it down. The captain and the fat one were dead, there was no doubt about that. No one could survive that. Had they been his own people, Lalli would have already felt the *Sielulintu* taking their *Itse* down the Birds' Path.

But the problem was that they weren't. They belonged to different gods, and Lalli could not feel where their souls were going. He knew they were dead, but he couldn't *feel it*. It made the stone of dread in his stomach heavier. The uncertainty of their fates.

He could not help them, and Reynir and Emil did not know how. Onni might have, but Onni was not here. They would have to find their own way to- Wherever it was that foreigners went upon their death. Tuuri said something once, when they were driving through that snow storm, about a place called Valhalla that Sigrun hoped to go to when she died.

He hoped she found it. If she hadn't...

"Mrow?"

Lalli turned around. The kitten had finally come out of hiding, now that the danger had passed. Her tail was still partially fluffed up from the fright, but she bravely raced towards Lalli and the shelter of familiarity he provided.

"Stupid useless thing," Lalli told it. The kitten didn't understand, of course. She just rubbed her face against his boot, purring shakily. Trying to comfort both him and herself.

Lalli picked her up in his arms just as Emil started yelling. He couldn't understand a word, but he could guess what he was saying from the tone.

We have to find them! We have to make sure they made it!

Lalli pressed his face into the kitten's fur and sighed shakily. Her purring intensified.

All Lalli could do now was make sure they didn't die in vain.

"Tuuri," he called, "Tuuri, I need you to translate."

Tuuri, looking at the end of her rope, turned to him as he was walking over. She had been forced to lower her mask or risk clogging the filters with her tears and snot.

"P-please tell me you can get through to him," she begged, "I- I don't know how-"

"Tell him not to make their sacrifice meaningless."

He was looking straight at Emil as he said it, trying to convey the importance of his words through sheer eye-contact. Tuuri dithered and nearly started crying again, but she dutifully translated when Emil asked her to.

He knew she did, because Emil flinched as if struck.

“Sigrun knew what she was doing,” Lalli continued, “She knew, and she did it to buy us time to get away. For us to survive and go home. If you perish here with her, she died for nothing.”

Tuuri translated all of that shakily, stopping to sob once or twice.

Emil just looked more and more stricken.

“We need to get going,” Lalli finished, after the silence had stretched uncomfortably.

Emil gave one, curt nod, wiped his face with his sleeve and went to re-pack the wheelbarrow. Still sniffing miserably, Reynir followed him.

Tuuri too, managed to wipe her tears away enough to put her mask back on. “Thank you.”

“Mrrrr,” Lalli growled and thrust the kitten into her arms, “I’m scouting ahead. Follow my footsteps.”

All of his words drained out of him, he turned around and ran, ignoring the people behind him.

With Emil’s Väki depleted, he probably wouldn’t attract any more trolls with his strange warmth so soon, but Lalli did not intend to leave any of those trolls alive long enough to seek it out.

Every time he made mistakes, someone paid for it with their lives. He could not afford to make any more mistakes, yet he kept making them.

Miserably, he wondered when he was finally going to learn that lesson.

Chapter End Notes

For those of you who were too lazy to google:

Rán: the goddess or the personification of the sea in Norse mythology, and anyone who was lost at sea or drowned belonged to her and her husband Aegir. Since Norwegians are said to mostly be sea-farers, I assume a fair amount of them go to Aegir's hall rather than Odin's.

Väki: in this context, read as mana, or inherent magical energy. In Finnish it can also mean life force.

Sielulintu: Means Soul Bird, and they are technically part of Karelian mythos. They are the birds that carry someone's soul to the afterlife, Tuonela, or into the dreamworld.

Itse: Finns consider the soul to be three-part.

Henki is the spirit or the breath, the part of the soul that keeps your physical body alive.

Itse is the consciousness, literally the *self*, the part that is actually *you*, and is the part that the birds carry into the afterlife or the dreamworld.

Luonto, like the one Lalli summoned, is the guardian entity that protects the rest of the soul, and is the last piece to join the human. They are compared to Haltja, guardian spirits of either people or places, so I'm headcannoning that, in the SSSS world, Luontos revert back to Haltja upon death until they find a new human to merge with. Henki, being the energy of life, presumably returns to nature upon death.

Anyone who know Norse/Finnish mythology better than I do, feel free to correct me if I got something grossly wrong.

Also, you might have noticed the chapter count changed *AGAIN*. The gods are punishing me for my hubris by giving me more ideas for this story than I know what to do with and I am a mere weak mortal so I keep putting them in.

If you were hoping your faves were close to the end of their suffering, I have another thing coming for you.

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Okay, this is sappy AF. Parts of this were written while preparing for my grandmother's funeral and I desperately needed some fluff and cuddling, and if I couldn't find it I was damn well going to create it.

Warning for some naked cuddling and Mikkel attempting poetry.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It took almost every last ounce of his strength to steer them to shore. Sigrun had passed out after one coughing fit too many, making Mikkel fear she hadn't expelled all the water out of her lungs.

He paddled a little faster.

His efforts finally paid off when the ice float brushed against land. Judging it shallow enough to swim, he retrieved his dagger and hefted Sigrun over his shoulders, then waded to the shore.

He was ready to collapse from the cold and the sheer exhaustion. But he couldn't. Not yet. He still had things to do.

Besides, Madsens were made of sterner stuff than that.

And luck proved to be on his side as well. In the distance he could see the slopes that belonged to the roofs of Old World houses. One of those would have to do for shelter. The sun hadn't gone down yet, but if they didn't find a way to get warm before temperatures dropped further, trolls would be the least of their problems.

Mikkel hefted Sigrun a bit higher and stubbornly started trekking.

Another stroke of luck was that, even though their employers had cut many corners on this mission, they had known which corners not to even nick if they wanted their crew members to return alive. Thus, their thermals were made with hollow-fiber polyester and their uniforms of thick Icelandic wool. Even soaking wet in near freezing temperatures, their bodies managed to retain enough warmth to keep them alive and kicking. Mikkel's regard for his bosses went up a notch.

And speaking of the Västerströms, would that Emil and his new superpowers were here. Warming up would be a lot easier if that was the case. Alas, Mikkel could only hope the children were neither stupid nor grief-stricken enough to try and look for them. With the exception of Reynir, they were well familiar with military protocol, and what it dictated in situations like these.

Plus, with the two of them gone, the highest authority was delegated to the longest serving immune member of their team: Lalli Hotakainen. Mikkel was certain the scout, at least, could keep the rest of them on track. Reynir also knew how to use the stove, so they wouldn't starve on the way. And Emil had probably absorbed enough of Sigrun's teaching to keep them safe from anything that had developed the taste for human flesh.

They could make it. They would. And with a few more lucky strikes, so would Sigrun and Mikkel.

Once they finally reached the abandoned houses, Mikkel picked the sturdiest-looking one that had an intact chimney. A quick look around was enough to determine nobody, dead or infected, had been here since its original owners had fled.

Perfect.

He laid Sigrun down in front of the fireplace and started building a fort. It was, in truth, his first time being stranded in the Silent World like this, but the military didn't spend a good chunk of its budget on drilling survival procedures into its soldiers for nothing.

Fourth Rule: If you find yourself in the Silent World at nightfall, do not attempt to return to civilisation. Find shelter, keep warm and follow the First Rule.

Right now, the biggest problems were potential hypothermia and Sigrun's infection. Mikkel's teeth had stopped chattering, which he knew was either a good or a very bad thing, but right now he didn't care very much.

He dragged a wardrobe in front of the front doors, sofas around the fireplace, and found some mouldy wooden logs and newspapers hidden in a chest next to the fireplace.

It was dry, so it would catch fire well, but Mikkel was sincerely hoping he wouldn't have to start a fire with two sticks. He didn't have any matches, though maybe there was something he could use as a flint-

"Lookin'... Fo' these?"

The voice startled him so badly he nearly knocked over one of the sofas.

Sigrun was conscious, smiling at him weakly from her back on the floor. Shakily, she was holding up a spare pack of Emil's grenades, only one of them missing.

"I could kiss you right now," Mikkel said honestly.

"Thought you... Didn't kiss... On the first... Date," Sigrun gasped out. Refusing to show how worried the hropting sounds of her breath made him, Mikkel took the grenades and plucked one out.

Standard Swedish issue. Twist the cap off sharply and it ignited the wick. Five seconds later it reached the lighter fluid in the chambers and blew everything sky high.

Twist the bottom cap, however, and the lighter fluid would pour out harmlessly. Mikkel dripped it generously over the logs and, once it was empty, twisted the upper cap over the logs. The wick was wet, but the flint was intact, and the fire caught on his third try.

"Alright, now I must ask for another thing I usually don't do on the first date," Mikkel said lightly, "Take off your clothes."

Sigrun attempted to laugh, only to start violently coughing again.

In the end Mikkel had to mostly undress her himself. He did it with strictly medical attention and left her in front of the fire. Then he started in on stripping himself, prompting him to discover that his rucksack had managed to stay attached to his back.

And, in yet another stroke of luck, it was the one Reynir had stuffed the vacuum-sealed comforter into. The plastic casing had held, and the comforter was both clean and perfectly dry.

“Alright, alright,” Mikkell mumbled under his breath, “Message received. I am starting to believe in you. If you manage to keep us alive, I’ll personally kneel in every temple in Iceland.”

“What’d ya say?” Sigrun asked, her speech still a little slurred.

“Nothing,” Mikkell waved her off, then dropped the comforter over her shoulders, “I’ll join you in a minute.”

“Mmmm,” Sigrun attempted to smirk lecherously, “Cud-ddling in f-f-front of th-the f-f-fire. Th-that all w-we doin’?”

“Yes. At least until your teeth stop chattering,” Mikkell smiled. If she was warm enough to shiver, there was hope yet.

“H-how ar-r-re y-yours *n-not* ?”

“I have better padding than you,” he patted his belly for emphasis. Truth be told, his shivers had just started up earlier than hers, and he’d always run somewhat hot. His body heat just returned quicker.

“W-w-well g-git th-that pad-ddin’ ov’r h-h-here,” Sigrun lifted one end of the comforter invitingly, “Ru-rude not-t t’ sh-share.”

“I assure you, I am the soul of politeness,” he nodded. As soon as he finished hanging their wet clothes on a curtain hanger held up on the backs of sofas, he grabbed their boots and crawled into the little fort. Boots he left in front of the fire, and himself he tucked into Sigrun’s side. Or rather, tucked her into his. He was both taller and warmer than her, so he tucked the comforter around himself and his arm around her waist.

Sigrun wasted no time in plastering every inch of her body to his. Her skin was far too cold for his liking, and she was still coughing at regular intervals, but as long as she was still warming up he chose to be optimistic.

Then he spotted her other arm.

“What happened?” he gently touched the faintly purple and swelling elbow.

“The giant kn-knocked me out on th-the ice,” Sigrun said, “Land-ded on it.”

“You really are something,” Mikkell grumbled, “The moment I fix one of your arms, you go ahead and ruin the other one.”

“S’not th-the way I planned to have y-your hands on me,” Sigrun just grinned, “But I’ll take it.”

Mikkell gave her a flat look. “*How* are you still flirting when you’re on the verge of freezing to death is beyond me.”

“S’a gift.”

“Well,” Mikkell unglued himself from her side to rummage through the rucksack for something he could splint and wrap her arm with, “At least with you around I won’t be out of a job anytime soon.”

“And you’re a-all about th-the job, eh?”

Mikkel gave her another flat look. It bounced off her harmlessly.

In the end, he found the spare roll of bandages in the pack, soaking wet. He wrung them out and hung them to dry while he checked the extent of the damage. Luckily, it didn’t seem she had actually broken her arm, just bruised it and sprained her elbow. One of the sticks for the fire made for a relatively good splint, and while the Old World blankets didn’t exactly smell good, they were whole enough to be used as a wrap.

“There,” he said as he finished, “It will have to do until the bandages are dry.”

“My hero,” Sigrun joked, “I guess Valhalla isn’t in the cards for me just yet.”

“Seems like it isn’t,” Mikkel agreed, “But I’ll let you know if your namesake comes along to pick you up.”

The words were meant as a joke, of course, a reference to the Valkyrie of legends that Sigrun had been named after. But the human Sigrun frowned and became deathly quiet.

“Mikkel,” she said gravely, “No, medic. I need you to promise me something.”

Mikkel’s heart picked up the pace. He hoped it didn’t show on his face. “As long as it is within my power to grant.”

“If this cough becomes a fever and you decide I won’t make it,” Sigrun took a deep breath, “I want you to leave me behind.”

“Sigrun, I assure you, I am perfectly capable of carrying you-”

“Listen to me!” Sigrun barked, turning to glare at him, “I want you to leave me behind with a sword and nothing else, while I’m still strong enough to swing it. And when you get back...” she grit her teeth, “Well, if you still decide to go to Dalsnes, find my parents. Generals Eide, both of them. Tell them how I died, and what I promised you. They’ll give you a job, any one you want. And- And make sure the kids make it. Got it?”

It dawned on Mikkel, why she was asking this. He’d worked with Norwegians before, enough times that he remembered them saying only those who died on the battlefield got to go to Valhalla. Those that died of sickness or in their beds would go to Helheim. Mikkel had heard stories about it as well, and the best he’d heard about it was that it was cold and boring.

Sigrun would have probably preferred the eternal torment of the Christian hell, than the eternal boredom of Helheim.

“Medic,” Sigrun looked at him when the silence stretched, “You’re obligated to grant dying requests, right? Promise me this.”

Mikkel swallowed thickly. “*If*. If I judge you beyond help and on death’s door before we make it to the port... Yes. I promise to grant it.”

Sigrun slumped against his side again. “Thank y-”

“But until then, you must promise *me* that you will try to stay alive as long as you can,” Mikkel cut her off, “As long as you have a fighting chance of staying in this world, I expect you to fight for it. I

am sure the gods would expect nothing less from you.”

“Oh?” Sigrun’s eyebrow shot up, “Since when do you care what the gods think?”

“Since they made their presence and expectations undeniably clear,” Mikkell raised an eyebrow right back, “And I didn’t hear my return promise.”

“Heh,” the smile on Sigrun’s face was softer than anything he’d seen cross her face before, “You are right, you know. Odin would expect nothing less from any warrior that hoped to feast in his hall,” her arm snaked around his waist and her cheekbone dug into his shoulder, “I promise. Either way, I will fight to my last breath. If you can put your Danish pigheadedness aside and pay honour to the gods, I certainly can’t let you usurp me.”

“*Upstage*,” Mikkell corrected on reflex, but he was smiling as well, “And what can I say? Even Danes have a certain limit to their disbelief. And the Silent World has thoroughly surpassed that limit.”

He waited for a witty reply, but it never came. Worried, Mikkell tilted his head to look at Sigrun, worried something was wrong.

Her eyes were closed, but her breathing was as even as it could be. Her shoulders were relaxed and her knuckles loose around the edge of the comforter.

She was merely asleep.

Mikkell sighed, a tiny smile playing on his face.

The night was quiet, only the crackling of fire to break the peace. Sleep came easily in these times, invited or not, and exhaustion was only too eager to let it in.

But they were not safe here, not by a long shot. A watchful eye was still needed, and Mikkell’s was the only one available. If he could find a way to keep it open.

And in the strange times they were in, there was no one to judge him for the habit he’d abandoned in his teens.

“*Of course, the Silent World isn’t the only thing to blame,*” he whispered melodiously into Sigrun’s hair, safe in the knowledge she couldn’t hear him, “*You see, I had met a Valkyrie bold, fiery of heart and hair, and I understood why Helgi the Hero slew a king to win her heart.*”

He, too, was fighting to keep his eyes open. And if a poetic verse crossed his lips, well, only the Silent World would witness it.

“*And once I saw her with my own eyes, well, believing in gods was not so strange. Because how could she have come to be, if not by divine hand? And once I saw her with my own eyes, then, I too believed in the gods of old. Because how could I disbelieve, with her to prove me wrong?*”

A yawn split his face, and his head fell on top of Sigrun’s. Only one last verse, left his lips, before sleep claimed him as his own.

“*You made me a believer.*”

They found shelter an hour before nightfall.

Rather, Lalli found it for them, steered them to it, and then immediately zipped off to check the perimeter. In the ruins of an abandoned barn, Tuuri set up the tent while Emil built up a fire Reynir could heat up their dinner on. He poured a fair amount into their only pot and ladled it generously.

It wasn't like they had to ration as much now, and with the tears salting the back of her throat it might even taste edible. Or it would, if she didn't feel like there was nothing but ash in her mouth.

Sigrun and Mikkel were *gone*. How were they supposed to just... continue on?

"Tuuri?" Reynir patted her shoulder, "Here, come sit by the fire."

Feeling mostly numb by now, Tuuri allowed herself to be led to the remains of a wooden bench and handed a bowl. Her seat was covered by dead moss so it was relatively soft to sit on, if disgusting. But any concept of hygiene beyond disinfection had been thrown to the wind the moment they lost the tank. They didn't even have a change of clothes with them.

Tuuri nearly burst into tears again. Why in the name of Hiisi was she thinking about *clothes*?! Like that was the most important thing they were missing!

"Here," Emil held out a cup of snow-water, "You need to drink something to produce any more tears."

Tuuri took a moment to give him the dirtiest look she could muster. "And I guess you've run out already?"

"Probably," Emil's voice was completely flat and his face blank. He wasn't even looking at her, just silently holding out the cup.

There wasn't really any point in a staring match when the other person wasn't even playing, so Tuuri sullenly accepted her water.

When her hand brushed against Emil's, almost too hot to touch, she noticed something strange.

"What happened to your gloves?"

Emil's hands were bare, and his sleeves burned almost past his wrists. Emil didn't even look at them.

"I guess I burned them off," he shrugged, "Hardly the worst thing I lost today."

Immediately, Tuuri felt like a horrible person. She hid her face behind the cup of water, ashamed. Of course she wasn't the only one grieving. She wasn't the only one close to Sigrun and Mikkel. Hiisi's kettle, Sigrun had talked about taking Emil back home with her to Dalsnes as her protege! You do not do that for people you aren't close to!

Yet Emil had taken what Lalli had said to heart and wasn't bawling his eyes out every other minute, unlike her. He just scooped more snow into another cup, let it melt in his hands and handed it to Reynir with the same words of encouragement.

It was only then that she noticed he'd been speaking Finnish the entire time.

And the sun was almost touching the horizon.

"Emil!" she jumped up in fright, "Are you alright?! Are you feverish? Do you need ice?"

With everything that had happened today, she had completely forgotten the *other* thing Emil was currently going through.

“I’m fine,” he sounded calm, at least, “It’s already begun.”

Tuuri could feel her heart trying to crawl out of her throat.

“How- How are you-?” she waved her hand at all of him.

“Not a mess?” Emil finished. Then shrugged. “It still hurts, but not as much.”

He held his hands up and cupped them. Flames grew from his palms, burning on his skin but not harming him. Bizarrely, it made Tuuri think of keeping a fire as a pet. “Now, the fire has an outlet. Somewhere to go.”

Everything fell quiet at that moment. Reynir was frozen with the ladle dripping stew and mash just left of his bowl. Tuuri held her cup and her bowl like they were the only real, solid things in this strange world.

Emil didn’t appear to have noticed. He just looked tired and sad, watching the little fire like he was seeing infinitely more profound in it than mere light and warmth.

Maybe he was. It wasn’t like Tuuri could tell.

Sometimes, she really, really wished Onni had decided to come with them. She usually found his overprotectiveness stifling, but here in the dark of the Silent World, alone except for boys younger than her who were just as lost as she was, she would have given almost anything in the world to have her big brother here by her side.

All she had was her cousin, who hadn’t even signed up for it of his own free will.

As if summoned, Lalli materialised from the shadows like a wraith. He made a beeline for Reynir and the food, then stopped when he noticed dinner was the last thing on Reynir’s mind. He followed the other mage’s line of sight, then froze when he saw Emil.

Emil with his little fire that made it seem like he was glowing from within. Or maybe he was.

Whatever the reason, it made Lalli frown and tug on Reynir’s sleeve. “We need to meet. We need to talk.”

Tuuri hastened to translate, “He said-”

“Yeah, I understood the ‘meet’ and ‘talk’,” Reynir swallowed a little warily, “And yeah, we really do.”

Emil, enchanted by the fire, didn’t seem to have heard them.

Chapter End Notes

Not how I planned to use the fic title, but eh, if it works...

Listen to Mikkel kids, this is indeed how you deal with hypothermia. The only thing I feel I should mention is that the cuddling worked is because they were both frozen. If one of them hadn't been soaked and frozen, cuddling with the other would have just caused two cases of thermic shock when you started off with one.

Also I just couldn't NOT make Sigrun react like Elainor:



Credit: nocontextgoodplace

And yes, some scenes will mirror what Lalli and Emil went through, but I will add a certain Mikkel/Sigrun twist, of course. Same situation has different outcomes, and that chapter count didn't go up for nothing.

Now, let's see how the boys manage with exactly zero adult supervision.

Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

It occurred to Lalli that this may have been a spectacularly bad idea.

In which Lalli has something to prove, Reynir is a good bro, there are unexpected allies, bridal carrying, a waltz, mysterious tragic pasts, Dreamworld weirdness and yet more screwing with canon. Not necessarily in that order.

Part one

Chapter Notes

This is actually the first part of a hideously long chapter, and I meant to post it all together but my lovely friend Rithalie threatened criminal action if she didn't get something to chew on, so I'm posting it in two parts. Like I told Rita, you can play bingo with the predictions of the next part.

This will do excellent things for my chapter count, I'm sure *sweats*

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Lalli was, once again, waiting on the rocks outside his Dreamspace. Waiting and feeling frustrated, once again, that he was quite literally the only mage here who couldn't cross the Dreamsea without falling into the *Alinen* with the trolls. Emil and Reynir were free to prance around without a care in the world, and Onni could fly over the sea, but Lalli? Lalli had to sit here and wait for someone to get him. If something happened to the others, he would be stuck here, unable to help. Again.

Useless, his own mind whispered to him. Lalli shook his head to chase it away.

He would *not* prove himself useless. Not again.

You already have, the sinister voice whispered, reminding him of the time his Luonto was gone and the ghost attacked the tank. Of the time he feared Emil would never open his eyes again, and the things inside his head would wear his face like a mockery. Of the giant attacking yesterday, and *Emil* having to rescue *him*.

Useless.

Lalli shook his head more vigorously and clapped his hands over his ears. He was starting to really hate these stupid lands, and all the weird things that kept happening in them that he could do nothing about!

Maybe Onni was right when he said-

“Hey, Lalli!”

Reluctantly, Lalli pried open his eyelids and looked towards the source of the greeting. It was Emil, morosely plodding along towards Lalli while, for some reason, dragging Reynir along by the hand. The stupid shepherd didn't seem to be paying *any* attention to where he was going, instead looking at the faraway point on the horizon, somewhere to his left.

Lalli did have to admit that, if anything, he'd expected their dispositions to be reversed.

“Hi,” Emil greeted once again when he reached Lalli, “Before you say anything, I'm fine. When the fire stopped flowing I came back to my senses, like usual,” he shot a worried look at Reynir, “I'm not so sure about him, though.”

Reynir looked completely zoned out. Lalli suspected that, had Emil not literally led him by the hand here, Reynir would have ended up lost somewhere out on the Dreamsea and been devoured.

Lalli had a quick way of fixing *that*, at least. He hopped over to Reynir and sharply poked his finger in between his eyebrows.

It worked as well as it did on Onni; which is to say, Reynir squealed like a startled dog and slapped his hands over his forehead.

“Owww!” Reynir whined behind his hands, “That hurt! I thought dreams weren't supposed to hurt!”

“Of course they do,” Lalli told him, “Just because you're dreaming doesn't mean this is not real.”

“What's got you so distracted, anyway? You've been looking in that direction from the moment I found you,” Emil asked, then turned strangely hopeful, “Can you... Can you sense Sigrun and Mikkell's- souls? Can you tell where they went?”

Lalli wanted to know too, actually. He looked at Reynir expectantly. His senses were better in the Dreamworld than Lalli's, and he was a mage of the right gods. He should be able to sense *something*.

But Reynir just squirmed uncomfortably. “Well, I- Kinda? I don't know.”

“Make sense,” Lalli ordered, in no mood for Reynir's blundering.

“I don't know!” Reynir waved his hands around helplessly, “I keep telling you, I don't have any training! I can still feel them like I did before, but I can't tell where they're going! Or if they're going anywhere!”

That got Lalli's attention. “You can sense them still?”

“If I focus, yeah,” Reynir pointed in the direction just off the north star, “Old Lady Pastor is that way,” he pointed towards north-east, “I can still feel Onni that way, and I can feel Tuuri next to me,” he grimaced slightly, “Mostly her elbow in my ribs. I could feel you here, and I could feel Emil approaching too, and the problem is that you all feel alive to me! I can't tell the difference between how alive you two are and how Old Lady Pastor is not! And Mikkell and Sigrun... They still feel the same,” he waved a hand vaguely in the southeast direction, “Just... Somewhere over there. I'm sorry.”

Lalli's eyes narrowed. Reynir's senses in the Dreamworld had turned out to be nothing short of fantastic, much to Lalli's consternation. Even Onni couldn't stretch his senses that far, if he didn't know precisely where to look. If Reynir could still sense them, they might be far, but perhaps not... *gone*.

"And you?" Lalli asked Emil.

"Me?" Emil shrugged, still looking disappointed from Reynir's little speech, "I don't feel them at all, even though I should. Wherever Sigrun and Mikkell went... It wasn't by me." For some reason he looked guilty about that. "I can't really feel the Pastor, either, unless we're close to her."

Emil couldn't sense them either, even though he of all mages here should have. Lalli felt his heart speeding up. If he was right...

"That's because she's not dead," he rushed the words out, "You can sense the souls of the dead, but not the living. Maybe because they are not your responsibility. And you can't feel the Dane and the Captain."

Emil and Reynir looked at him with wide eyes.

"They might still be alive," Lalli nodded decisively, "And if they are dreaming, we might see where they are."

"Wait, really?!" Emil looked heartbreakingly hopeful, "You think we can find them?"

"He can," Lalli nodded towards Reynir, "But even if we do, they are not mages. They sleep in the *Alinen*. Underneath the Dreamsea. You cannot go there."

"But you can," Reynir caught on, then paled, "But... I'm pretty sure there is something in the water! I've seen trolls coming out *twice*, and something chased me when I was first finding Emil! What if something finds you down there?"

"I can handle myself," Lalli glared at him. He knew better than anyone just what lurked in the *Alinen*. "You just need to get me there, and then pull me out. I can dive down and see if they are alive, maybe even where they are. If the Moose finds me I can fight it off long enough to surface."

"A Moose? Like one of the ghosts? Here?" Emil asked, concern written in every line of his body, "Are you sure you can do it?"

"Of course I'm sure," Lalli growled, "I've done it before." He had. Barely, and against everything his grandmother and cousin had ever taught him, but he had.

"...Okay," Emil didn't look very mollified, "Just... Be careful, please. And if something finds you come back up immediately, okay?"

Did Emil really think he was so helpless? He was as bad as Onni! Lalli had been a trained mage for far longer than Emil was even aware magic existed!

He would not prove useless.

"Grrm," Lalli turned to Reynir, "Take us there."

Reynir's eyes bounced uncertainty between Lalli and Emil. He opened his mouth like he wanted to say something, and then audibly clicked his mouth shut.

“Right, priorities,” he cleared his throat, “This way.”

Lalli didn't even look back at Emil as he followed in Reynir's footsteps.

In retrospect, he really should have. He might have noticed Emil wasn't the only one following them.

The walk was tense, with hardly a word said. Reynir led the way solemnly, for once taking care to shorten his steps so Lalli and Emil didn't have to hop after him with their shorter legs. Well, just Lalli. Emil didn't need to follow in anyone's footsteps to stay afloat.

Just as he thought about it, Lalli had a sinking feeling that was like one of Tuuri's weird jokes. The kind that said one thing but were supposed to mean something else.

He ignored the feeling.

“It's...” Reynir slowed down in the middle of nowhere, “Somewhere around here? I think... This is where the feeling is strongest,” he wandered in a wide circle around a particular point, paused, then walked backwards, “No... Here? Sorry, just... Give me a moment, you two stay here.”

Even though watching Reynir make a fool of himself was mildly entertaining, Lalli was currently more concerned with the fact that there were no rocks for him to stand on. Reynir's path was anything but predictable, and therefore not a good place to step if he wanted to stay above water and avoid alerting any grosslings to his position. So his only option was-

“Here,” Emil tugged on his sleeve, “Put your left foot right between mine and lift your right leg. I've got you.”

Lalli let himself be gently maneuvered until he was balanced on his left leg, his foot right on the overlap of the two ripples created by Emil's boots. It wasn't a very stable position, so he had to wrap his arms around Emil's shoulders to keep balance while Emil held him by his waist.

It also left them, quite literally, with their noses pressed together.

It made Emil's eyes go a bit crossways, trying to keep his eyes on Lalli. Lalli refused to admit it was very cute.

Of course, then the stupid Swede started laughing.

“What?” Lalli asked irritably.

“Heh,” Emil rubbed the tip of his nose against Lalli's affectionately, “It just occurred to me: in this position I can teach you how to dance. I still remember the Waltz steps, believe it or not,” his smile turned a little shy, “Would you like to learn?”

“Why?” Lalli asked, momentarily forgetting he was supposed to be annoyed with him, “Is it for a ritual?”

“No,” Emil laughed, “Unless you consider preparing for high society a ritual.”

“Do we have to prepare for high society?” Lalli was confused. How could there be different levels of society? They all lived in the same country, didn't they? And even the people who gave the orders and those who followed them all went to the same sauna. Maybe the Swedes were just weird.

“Maybe. Depends on how famous we’ll be when we return to civilization,” Emil was still smiling, though it seemed lighter now, “Wanna try? Reynir doesn’t look like he’ll be done anytime soon.”

“Reynir’s dog has more brains than he does,” Lalli grumbled into Emil’s collar, “...what do I do?”

“First, stand on my toes.”

Lalli gave him a weird look for that.

“Well, usually, we wouldn’t be standing on water for this and you would need to mirror my steps,” Emil said, trying to hold back his giggles, “But considering the circumstances, standing on my toes is the best option. And it’s not like you weigh anything much.”

Lalli glared at him for that and stood with his full weight right on Emil’s toes.

“Yes, like that,” Emil, annoyingly, didn’t even seem to notice any extra pressure, “So you extend your right arm, and press your left hand to my bicep.”

“Mrrr,” Lalli growled, but obeyed. They ended up in a position that looked like the most awkward hug Lalli had ever experienced, and he was related to Tuuri and Onni. Emil held Lalli’s hand a ways to the side, and placed his right palm firmly to Lalli’s shoulder blade. It forced Lalli to hold both of his elbows up like he was preparing to cast a spell. His confusion did not abate.

“Okay, so it’s six basic steps, three steps for half a turn, the second turn mirrors the first,” Emil babbled some nonsense, “I lead, and you mirror. So it goes... One-two-three-turn, one-two-three-turn...”

Emil started stepping to the count rhythmically, and Lalli could see what he meant when he said to mirror his steps. And even if he wasn’t standing on Emil’s toes the steps were simple. Back-right-feet together-turn, front-left-feet together-turn, then repeat. It was actually pretty nice once they got the hang of it.

At some point Emil stopped counting and started humming. It was pleasantly slow and lilting, and Lalli felt himself relaxing into it. Once he memorised the steps he lifted his eyes from their feet and just rested his chin on Emil’s shoulder. Emil’s steps flattered for half a second, then resumed their course a bit slower.

The rhythm and the swaying, along with Emil’s gentle rumbling in his ear, were so pleasant Lalli felt his eyelids drooping. He hadn’t even noticed how high-strung he’d been until he slumped against Emil, letting him support most of Lalli’s weight. Emil’s arm around his waist tightened a tiny bit, but his rhythm did not change. He continued to perform his strange dance, Lalli balanced on his toes, to a tune sweetly hummed in the depths of his throat.

For a moment, Lalli completely forgot where he was and what was happening, and simply enjoyed the buoyant sensation and the rhythmic rumbling in his ear.

“Lalli?” Emil said quietly, “Lalli, are you- *purring*?”

“No,” Lalli immediately stopped. Dammit, he hadn’t even noticed he was doing it!

“Awww,” Emil murmured into his ear, “It’s cute.”

“Mrrr,” Lalli grumbled. He may have also been blushing.

“Awwwww.”

Lalli froze. *That* hadn’t come from Emil. He swiveled around abruptly, remembering that they were not, in fact, alone out here.

Reynir was standing some distance away with a stupid expression on his face people usually reserved for cute kittens and puppies and other tiny, adorable animals. Worse, he was looking straight at Lalli and Emil as he was making it.

“A-ah,” Emil froze then stuttered, “Reynir, uh, have you found them?”

“Hm? Oh, yeah!” Reynir pointed right where he was standing, “They’re here, straight downwards. But you two were having a moment and I didn’t want to interrupt.”

Emil blushed to the roots of his hair. Lalli swore the only thing preserving Reynir’s life and braid was the fact that Finnish mages couldn’t walk on the Dreamsea.

Lalli was precariously close to just risking it though.

But first: they needed to do what they came here for.

“They’re definitely alive,” was Lalli’s verdict once he and Emil maneuvered their way to Reynir’s spot, “I can feel them too.”

Emil breathed a great sigh of relief. “Thank Heavens. Can one of you tell how far away from us they are?”

“Hmmm,” Reynir’s nose scrunched up, “I don’t think so. Onni is all the way over in Sweden and he doesn’t feel much farther than the Old Lady Pastor. And the water is making it harder to tell, too. What about you, Lalli?”

“I can’t tell where they are in the real world from here,” Lalli said, “But if they are sleeping, I can ask them.”

“You’re still going to dive down?” Emil didn’t look any happier at that prospect since the last time it came up.

“Don’t you want to know where they are?”

“Of course!”

“Then I’m going down.”

Lalli did not wait for a reply. He let go of Emil’s shoulders and launched himself backwards, toes pointed and legs straight. The last thing he saw was Emil’s surprised and terrified face.

And then he was in the *Alinen*.

He had to be fast. He hadn’t caused much of a splash but it was only a matter of time before he was noticed.

Lalli dived down as fast as he could. The water was dark and deep, Emil’s warmth nothing but a fading memory.

Lalli dived deeper.

In the darkness, much further down, he could see tiny spots of red. A few bubbles escaped him in fright, but the red spots weren't moving. Probably not sleeping trolls then.

Lalli dived deeper.

And then started falling.

“Wha-!?” he managed to utter a moment before he hit the water... While underwater. As he surfaced again he found he was able to breathe. On the bottom of the Dreamsea there appeared to be another ocean, far darker and colder than even the one he just came from.

Grandma never mentioned *this* part of the *Alinen*.

Lalli forbade himself from panicking. As quietly as he could, he turned around himself. The red dots he'd noticed when diving down turned out to be tiny glowing lily pads. Strange mists hovered above the dark water, obscuring his vision. It was cold enough to kill him if he remained in the water for too long. He needed to move.

He closed his eyes and tried to feel what Reynir felt. There was something... A kind of smell that reminded him of the sheep islands back in Saimaa. It seemed far too incongruous for this kind of setting, so Lalli swam in that direction.

He came upon a door. A barn door, to be exact. It was closed.

Lalli strained to reach the door handle from the water, but it was too high for him to reach. He swam over to the other side, but the door appeared exactly the same. Even the handle had moved to the opposite side. Trying to climb up the side proved fruitless.

Lalli was getting tired and slow. If he couldn't reach the door then he needed to find some other shelter, *fast*.

He kicked away from the barn doors and looked around. The mists made seeing anything near impossible, and it was getting far too cold to stay down here for much longer. And if he didn't find something to at least stand on, he didn't know how he was going to return to the surface.

It occurred to Lalli that this may have been a spectacularly bad idea.

He swam in progressively bigger circles around the door, keeping it in his sight just in case. On his third turn, when exhaustion started gripping him tighter, he noticed a strange green light in the distance. He paddled closer to it until it materialised into a weird window overlooking a mountainside in mid-summer.

Whatever it was, it was open and full of sunlight. Better there than here.

Lalli pulled himself out of the water and onto the lush grass of what looked like a mountain trail. The mountain he found himself on was higher than any he'd been on in his entire life, and its slope abruptly ended in a huge lake. Lalli leaned over to get a better look, fascinated by the fluffy clouds hovering right above the water.

He was so fascinated, in fact, that he didn't notice someone approaching him from behind until they already had the tip of their rifle pressed to the back of his head.

“Alright, whoever you are, turn around slowly with your hands in the air. And don’t even think about coughing in my face, I’m immune.”

Well, Lalli thought, at least he’d found the person he’d been looking for.

Chapter End Notes

Alinen means the Underneath. It's the space where dreams happen.

Also, Lalli has a fear of failure complex a mile wide. Remember, oh, *the entirety of chapter 8 of the 1st adventure*? Not good things happen when his pride and his complexes clash.

And yes, Lalli purrs as a happy stim, you can pry that headcanon from my cold dead fingers

Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Lalli drowned.

Part Two

Chapter Notes

Huzzzah! The highly anticipated part two!

WARNING: Graphic depiction of drowning

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sigrun had been alone for about a week now. After she'd gotten separated from her team she wrapped up the wound on her leg and made her way to the nearest outpost. It was abandoned and would remain that way until the winter winds started coming, but the leftover supplies were still good. She'd downed some painkillers from the medicine chest, then sewn up her leg with stitches that would undoubtedly make her mom cry and force her to take sewing lessons again. But the wound hadn't gotten infected, so her mom couldn't bitch too much about it. Scars made her look badass, anyway.

Nevertheless, she was still limping, which was a death sentence in the middle of the summer on top of a fjord. She had to either wait until her team, who had hopefully made it back to base mostly intact, went looking for her, or her leg was healed enough to run again.

In the meantime, she was mostly bored, with nothing to do but slink around the area, hoping to catch an unsuspecting immune critter to roast over the fire for some fresh meat.

Until someone appeared.

She didn't recognise the skinny figure clothed in white fur, which was worrying all on its own. He'd appeared out of damn near nowhere, soaking wet, and was currently looking at the sea like he'd never seen anything like it before.

Very much not a good combination. Sigrun wasn't exactly in tip-top shape for troll wrestling, but the stranger didn't *seem* to be infected. Might as well warn them first, it wasn't exactly fair to shoot someone in the back if they were still human. Sigrun sneaked up behind them with her rifle pointed straight at the brain.

“Alright, whoever you are, turn around slowly with your hands in the air. And don’t even think about coughing in my face, I’m immune.”

The stranger didn’t even tense. A heartbeat later he slowly lifted his hands up and turned around.

Sigrun was pretty sure her jaw just hit the floor.

“Twigs?!” she balked, “What in all the halls of Asgard are you doing here?! *How* are you even here?”

“You’re dreaming,” Twigs said with an impressive level of calm, considering he was still at gunpoint, “You and the Dane got separated from us. I went to look for you in the Dreamworld.”

The words brought some clarity to Sigrun’s mind. Right, Mikkell had played the heroic mutineer and jumped in the ocean after her. She would be tempted to court martial him for that if it didn’t make her feel like a sixteen-year-old infatuated fool. Actually, she might court martial him just for that. And then marry him for good measure. That would teach him.

“Focus,” the little mage guy ordered, his sharp voice kicking some lucidity back into Sigrun’s head, “Do you know where you are?”

“Outpost fifteen clicks outside of Dalsnes compound,” she said promptly, then grimaced, suddenly realising just where and *when* she was, “Oh. Sheesh, of all the memories I could have ended up dreaming about, it just *had* to be this one again, didn’t it?”

“I meant in the real world,” Pipsqueak grumbled, “Can you reach the pickup point in time for the arrival of the boat?”

Sigrun scratched the back of her head in thought. “To be honest, I’ve got no idea. You really should have found Mikkell for this, he’s the only who managed to stay conscious for the whole thing. But I don’t think we’ve drifted that far,” she paused, then leveled a stern glare at the baby mage, “You four better not be thinking of backtracking to get us, or Thor help me-”

“We’re not,” Pipsqueak said, “We just wanted to see if you were still alive, or if the giant had killed you.”

Sigrun tried to read some, any emotion from his face, but she was no Emil. Kid had a hell of a poker face, but she decided to assume he was being honest.

“Okay,” her shoulders slumped in relief, “Because you don’t need to worry about us. The boat arrives in two weeks, even if we go at snail’s pace we should be able to make it in time, as long as we walk to the north.”

“Good,” Twigs nodded decisively, “Are either of you injured?”

“My arm’s busted and I’m ready to cough up a lung, but I’ve had worse,” Sigrun just shrugged, “I can still walk.”

“And the Dane?”

“Fresh as a goddamn daisy,” she grumbled, “I’m starting to think he’s onto something with his fat bear body shape. He’s about as indestructible as a fat bear, that’s for sure.”

Twigs nodded sagely, for a moment reminding her a lot of uncle Trond. The old-man’s usual expression looked strangely hilarious on his kittenish face.

And speaking of Twigs' face and the fact that Sigrun was currently looking at it...

"Hey, seriously, how are you here?" she waved a hand at him, "I know mages can walk through dreams and all, but Brita told me they can only contact other mages," Sigrun wracked her brains trying to remember what the main mage of the Dalsnes base told her, "Non-mages are stuck underneath some kind of ocean or something, aren't they?"

"Foreign mages can't reach the *Undersea*," Twigs said, "Emil and Reynir can walk on top of the Dreamsea, but they are stuck there. It's safer, but they can't go any deeper than the surface. I can."

Was it just her, or did the little scout seem a bit smug about it? Sigrun zeroed in on the tiniest creases that she knew showed up in the corner of his mouth when he was smug or satisfied, and sure as Hel, there they were.

Oh yeah. Definitely smug he could do something Braid-head and her Little Viking couldn't.

"Damn, that's hella cool," she grinned proudly and even ruffled his hair for good measure. He went from looking smug to looking like a smug but equally bewildered cat.

Freya's ample tits, he was cute. If she survived this, she was taking him home with her in a suitcase, see what happened to anyone who tried to stop her.

"I need to go," he said as he ducked away from her hand.

"Okay," Sigrun nodded, "How are you getting back?"

"I came through an opening over there," he pointed at a tiny stone shrine near the trail, "But that's closed. There has to be some other way out though. If there was an entrance, there must be an exit."

"Hey, you're the mage here, kid," Sigrun shrugged, "I'll help if I can, but if there's a way out of here I sure never found it."

"Hmmm," Twigs looked around, his little nose scrunched in thought, "Onni said an opening in your Dreamspace is usually something that... Doesn't really belong. Like a tiny tear in the cloth of your space. Something about this place is familiar to you, isn't it?"

Sigrun flinched. "Yeah, it sure is."

"Do you see anything here that *isn't* familiar?"

Sigrun bit her lip and looked around. It looked just like the outpost she'd spent so many days in, the whole time unaware of the disaster that had happened to her team. By the time her injury had healed enough to go looking for them, there was nothing left of them to be found.

And Sigrun had been here when they were attacked, safe and sound, instead of with them. She was the only one that survived to bear their names on her conscience.

Now, years after the fact, she'd accepted that there was nothing she could have done. Even if she had been there, she'd been injured, and no better equipped than they were. All she could have done was join them in Valhalla.

She'd made peace with that knowledge. It didn't mean she liked thinking about this place and what it represented.

But... Sigrun distinctly remembered the sky had been clear and sunny for her entire stay. She had considered it a blessing at the time.

There was definitely not a single stormcloud hovering around the mountain peak.

“Up there,” she pointed at the offending intruder, “The grey cloud. That sure wasn’t there when I was last here.”

“Then that’s where I need to go,” he turned and started climbing straight up, “Thank you.”

“No problem,” Sigrun gave him a lazy salute, “And Twigs?”

“Mrrr?”

“Tell the others not to wait for us if we don’t make it, okay? Getting themselves back home takes priority.”

Twigs blinked down at her. “I know.”

“Good. Now get going.”

He did. He scaled the cliffside like a weird cross between a cat and a mountain goat, hopping up to the top until Sigrun could barely see him.

Her leg wasn’t really injured anymore, but she could have sworn it twinged in phantom pain.

“See you on the other side, Kitty-boy.”

Lalli climbed up the steep mountain, his eyes stubbornly trained on the aberrant raincloud.

He hoped it was the exit. If he was stuck here with the Captain he didn’t know what would happen with his body. Would he simply disappear when he awoke, like he did if he came to Onni’s space, or would he be trapped in the closed walls of a non-mage’s space, his body breathing but with nobody home to make it mind?

No. He could not afford to fail again.

He reached the top in record time, balancing on a single unsteady rock. The cloud hovered right above him, somehow more than just condensed rain. It was the exit, Lalli was sure of it.

His fingers sunk into the fabric of the dream, into the dark mist, and pulled it apart.

He was immediately soaked to the bone.

“Perkele!” Lalli growled, nearly losing his footing and falling straight down to the bottom of the mountain. The water kept falling like the densest rain he’d ever experienced, so he held his palms up to magically form a barrier.

With the water stopped falling, he chanced a look up.

The Dreamsea waited above, with the faintest rays of light coming from the surface.

There weren’t any trolls swimming around.

Lalli breathed a sigh of relief, but at the same time, it seemed almost too easy, considering just how dangerous what he was attempting to do was.

But he didn't have any other way to go but up.

Lalli steeled his nerves, uttered a quick prayer, and dived.

And the moment he was completely in the water, he found out why he couldn't see any trolls above him.

It was a single troll, wrapped around the opening of the Captain's dreamscape. Waiting for him.

~~"Did you think I wouldn't notice you, little swimmer?"~~ the Moose asked mockingly, its giant red eye trained squarely on Lalli. "I always notice when you visit me."

It was only his excellent reflexes and Onni's training that saved him. He threw up his shield fast enough to blast the Moose away from himself, planted his feet on the temporary barrier and *pushed*.

The Moose wasn't stunned for long. Its long tentacles shot after Lalli, trying to wrap around him like a cocoon. Lalli summoned his Luonto's glowing paws over his own and slashed at the oncoming beast.

It did little more than annoy it. But that was enough, he just needed to keep away from it until he was on the surface, until he got help.

Just a little longer, he told his burning lungs, *Just don't pass out!*

He bared his teeth in a threatening hiss, and his Luonto did the same. The water touched by his breath boiled hot enough that the Moose backed off for a full second. Desperately trying not to inhale the water, Lalli paddled up quickly, fighting the drag of the water and his own body.

The bubbles from his Luonto's breath carried him the last stretch to the surface, and then he could *breathe*.

"Haaaaa!" Lalli gulped the air greedily, trying to get as much of it as his abused lungs would allow, then took more. He had to get out, he had to-

"Emiiiiiiil!" he screamed with every last spare gulp of air, "Reyniiiiir!"

"Lalli?!"

Oh no, Lalli had time to think, *They sound far away*.

And they were. Lalli barely managed to turn around in time to spot them, and they were distant smudges on the Dreamsea.

Of course, to find the captain he'd swam away from the drop point, where they were waiting. Emil and Reynir were a hundred meters away from where he'd surfaced.

They were running, but Lalli knew they wouldn't make it in time.

He was still taking a breath when the Moose grabbed him again and pulled him under.

~~“You can not hide from me, little swimmer,”~~ the Moose mocked him, its tentacles dragging Lalli deeper and deeper.

Lalli desperately grabbed the air bubbles and pulled them down into his shield. It wasn't real air, so even this much would last him for a few minutes.

He wasn't sure the same could be said for his only protection.

~~“Drown yourself,”~~ the Moose cooed, a parody of comfort, its tentacles squeezing tighter and tighter ~~“It will be faster. And easier.”~~

Lalli kept pushing his power into the shield, trying to calm down enough to think of a way out. Onni couldn't hear him down here, and his friends couldn't reach him underwater.

He was on his own.

A flash of bright, fiery light appeared above him for a moment before the Moose's tentacles covered the top of his shield, obscuring Lalli's view of the surface momentarily.

~~“They cannot reach you here. Accept your fate, little swimmer,”~~ the Moose whispered, looking at Lalli from a single, frightening red eye, ~~“You will tire soon enough.”~~

Lalli's shield cracked, then burst. The scaled tentacles wrapped around him before he could move and squeezed.

All the air he'd painstakingly gathered escaped his lungs in a single burst.

Lalli didn't struggle this time. He couldn't. He had no power, no air, and no way out.

No, he thought despairingly, I was so close. I have to tell them...

...that I wasn't...

...useless...

Water flooded his mouth but he couldn't even expand his chest to inhale it. His entire body had surpassed the verge of pain. He could feel nothing but agonizing, mind-ripping numbness.

There was no relief for his senses. You cannot pass out if you're already unconscious.

His eyes rolled back. Dimly, he could see the last of his air bubbles escaping to the surface.

A red swan was flying overhead, preparing to dive down. And then-

There was nothing but light.

Lalli drowned.

It was the only explanation for what followed.

A great seal beast with a long snout and golden glowing eyes appeared before him.

~~“Nix!”~~ the Moose hissed, ~~“He's in line!”~~

He had never before felt the cold dread that seized him as he watched the beast of the Dreamsea pull Lalli under.

Reynir clawed at the water but it was futile. He could feel his fingers sinking into the water but it felt like trying to dig through snow after an avalanche. Impossible.

Emil, clearly desperate, tried pressing his palms to the water and summoning fire. It blazed around him and raised clouds of steam, but it didn't make a difference.

They could vaguely see Lalli's shield glowing underwater.

And they saw when it burst.

"No!" Emil screamed, pounding at the water, "Lalli! *Lalliiiiiii!!!* "

Reynir couldn't even do that much. He was shaking too badly.

He felt something powerful passing above them. Fearing it was another troll, Reynir looked up.

It was a swan. A red swan.

Reynir felt cold, and he didn't know why.

"What the-?" Emil yelped right before the sudden waves knocked them off their feet.

It was really weird trying to keep balance on waves when you couldn't sink. Reynir managed to get up on his hands and knees just in time to see another giant sea beast enter the fight.

But instead of Lalli, it attacked the Moose.

Reynir and Emil looked at each other in shock. But there wasn't really time to voice their incredulity. Troll blood was rising in the water, Lalli was still down there, and they could *still not reach him* .

Reynir had never in his life felt so useless.

But the Moose abruptly released Lalli with a pained roar and slithered away. Reynir's breath seized in hope, premature it might have been, because Lalli *wasn't moving*. The other beast circled him once, and then... Pushed him up towards the surface.

It only took a few seconds. It felt like hours.

The moment Lalli's fur cloak reached the surface Emil and Reynir grabbed one shoulder each and pulled him up as fast as they could.

"He's not breathing," Emil gasped out, "What-?"

"Hold him like this," Reynir ordered, silently praying that the procedure for saving a sheep from drowning would work on a human, "Hold tight."

Emil obeyed, wide eyed and terrified. Reynir put one hand over Lalli's diaphragm and slapped his back as hard as he could. Then did it again. And again.

Finally, Lalli's entire body seized and he vomited water all over Emil's clothes. He wheezed like a dying kitten and trashed hard enough that Emil almost dropped him, but he was *breathing*.

Had the situation not been so dangerous, Reynir would have hugged them both and never let go.

But they were still not out of danger.

There were more trolls circling underneath their feet, and Lalli was in no condition to stand on his own.

“We can’t stay here,” Emil whispered, then looked at Reynir, “Can you carry Lalli?”

“What?” Reynir asked incredulously.

“Can you carry Lalli back to my house?” Emil repeated, “Can you run there with him?”

Reynir had once hauled a sheep under each arm and ran with them both to the other side of the farm to escape a starving stray dog. He nodded.

“Then take him,” Emil lifted Lalli up higher and pressed him into Reynir’s arms, “I’ll stay and make sure they don’t follow.”

“But-”

“Run!” Emil yelled, and this time it was unmistakable a command, “Take Lalli and run! Go back to the house, *run!*”

Reynir stumbled back in time to avoid a grasping tentacle reaching for his leg from the water. Instead it snagged Emil, but no matter how hard it pulled it couldn’t get him to sink. Emil sent a gust of fire its way and it released him. It was clear they posed very little threat to him.

But Lalli was unconscious, and he *could* sink.

And the red swan was still circling.

Reynir didn’t need to be told again. He threw one of Lalli’s arms over his shoulders, hooked his arms under Lalli’s back and knees, then, with one last look at Emil, *ran*.

Ran like he had never ran before in his life.

And the swan followed.

“You can’t have him,” Reynir whispered, holding Lalli a bit tighter, “You can’t have him.”

He ran faster.

The house was exactly where he sensed it, submerged except for the roof, the hatch left open for some fortunate reason. Reynir leapt from the water to the roof in one jump and all but tumbled down the ladder. He shifted Lalli to just one arm and with the other slammed the doors shut, but not before catching one last glimpse of the red swan.

For the moment, it was quiet except for Reynir frantic breaths. Finally, when nothing happened and no birds came knocking upon the door, only then did Reynir dare let go of the handle.

Lalli was still not waking up.

Reynir refused to panic. He hosted Lalli up again and carried him over to the dining room, where there was at least warm. He wasn’t sure if Emil’s warnings about the hearth applied to everyone, but

he wasn't about to test it. He laid Lalli down on the couch and covered him with a blanket. The cloak, he supposed, didn't count as alive anymore, so he hung it up to dry by the fire.

"Oh, hello Emil's little friends!" the Nanny greeted them as she came out of the kitchen, followed by an entire pack of cats and Duchess, "You are just in time for supper!"

It was always suppertime in Emil's house, really, but Reynir had learned the hard way there was no explaining it to the Nanny. He just accepted a plate of roasted beef and potatoes and sat on the couch by Lalli's feet.

He mostly picked at the usually delicious food, but his appetite had fled for parts unknown. Little wonder, considering.

"Hey, Duchess?" he asked, not really looking at the dog, "Do you know if Emil's okay?"

"You know, you could ask *me* that."

Reynir jumped up so fast he sent the plate crashing to the floor.

There was Emil, a little singed but otherwise unharmed, standing at the entrance with the three-headed cat in his arms.

"Emil!" Reynir leapt at him and wrapped his arms around him before Emil could even think about defending himself, "You *are* okay!"

"Less squeezing, ouch!" Emil wheezed, "Mind my spine, please!"

"What happened?!" Reynir eased his death hold, but didn't release Emil, "What was that beast? And did you see the red swan?"

"Uhhhh, yeah," Emil mumbled, "About the beast..."

"Mrow."

Reynir froze. Slowly, carefully, he released Emil and the cat that had been squished up between them. The three-headed cat.

"I think they only take the shape of cats inside the house. It looked like a weird horse with eight arms for legs before we entered," Emil explained, "And before that, like that seal giant we ran into when we were running from that first ghost, but with a horse head."

"The horse ghost," Reynir stared at the cat. It blinked back at him placidly.

He... didn't really know how to feel about that. But since it seemed to be on their side now, Reynir decided they had bigger things to worry about.

"And there was a swan on the roof when I came back," Emil continued, oblivious that he was holding the very reason he had nearly died three times over, "I think it's someone's fylgja? It looked mostly like a normal animal, except red, and it could talk."

"What did it say?"

"Not much," Emil shrugged, "Just looked at me very hard, said 'interesting', and flew away. That's it. Do you know anything about it?"

Reynir wasn't so sure about Emil's theory, but he shook his head. As far as he knew, none of the tales of the gods featured swans. Reynir only knew what they looked like from pictures. This was the first time he saw one himself.

"Is Lalli okay?" Emil set the cat down and went over to the sofa, "Should we try and wake him up?"

"Well, he's breathing, and he's getting warmer," Reynir shrugged, "I think we can just wait until he wakes up."

Emil didn't say anything to that. Reynir wandered over to the other side of the table and took a slice of cake. Cake made everything better.

"Do you think he found them?" Emil asked somewhere around the third slice, "Sigrun and Mikkell?"

"He must have," Reynir said, "He was down there a long time. If he hadn't found them he wouldn't have been able to breathe."

Emil looked vaguely horrified at that.

"Here," Reynir took another slice of cake and put it on a plate, "Have some cake."

"How is cake going to help?"

"Maybe it won't," Reynir shrugged, "But it can't hurt, and there's not much else we can do right now."

Emil looked at the piece of strawberry cake, then sighed. "Can you pass me the chocolate one?"

Reynir smiled kindly, "Sure."

Chapter End Notes

I realized earlier that today is the six-month anniversary of this fic, so I rushed a bit to finish it. Not bad for a fever-dream story that was supposed to be 20k max, huh? It was supposed to be one and done, with Emil becoming a firebender as the ending.

Now it's like: is Lalli going to be okay? What did the Swan of Tuonela mean? Why did Sleipnope help Lalli? Will Sigrun and Mikkell make it? No one knows, least of all the author.

Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

The crew finds ways to keep going.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*Stupid, stupid, **stupid**.*

Onni was flying. Flying like all the horrors of the world were behind him, but he knew it wouldn't be enough.

*I'm too late. Stupid, stupid- I told him not to do anything stupid, I **told** him.*

Even Onni could not fly faster than the Swan of Tuonela.

"Lalli," he called breathlessly, "*Lalli*."

There was no answer.

Onni flew over the patch of Dreamsea where he'd last felt Lalli's *Väki*, but there was nothing there. Nothing but blood in the water, and the scavengers feasting on the spiritual remains.

Lalli was not here, and the Swan was leaving.

And all Onni could do was hope that Lalli had left with her instead of being torn apart by trolls.

Or worse.

He flew faster, pushing his wings further past the edge of exhaustion. He had to check, he had to see for himself that Lalli made it. He wasn't there to guide him, and Tuuri couldn't, but Lalli must have found a way. He must have! He had found his way, and he was going to Tuonela, he wasn't-

"No," Onni whispered in horror, "*No*."

Lalli's area was still there. Empty.

"Noooo!" Onni screamed, heedless of the danger. He crashed through the walls of Lalli's area, transforming midfall, fell onto the wet grounds right outside of Lalli's pond, and didn't bother getting up.

His cousin was *gone*, and his area was *still here*.

If a mage's area didn't disappear upon their death, it meant their *Sielulintu* was still guarding it instead of carrying their soul to Tuonela. It meant the Swan hadn't taken Lalli. But something else *had*.

And that something still had Tuuri in its clutches.

Onni screamed into the uncaring dirt. *Why? Why did he have to watch his family be devoured and torn by a Kade for the second time in his life? Wasn't the first time enough?!*

And he still couldn't do anything to save them!

Onni beat at the mud and dirt in helpless rage, wishing the squelch beneath his fingers was the Kade. Either of them. He wanted to kill them both, the order didn't matter!

And he was going to. He swore on the graves of his family, *he was going to kill those monsters* .

Tuuri woke up slowly, too warm to be entirely comfortable but just warm enough to make waking up a chore.

She yawned and stretched as best she could, squished up between Lalli and Reynir. Protocol dictated that, in the field, non-immune members of the party slept in between immune members, in theory to be the last line of defense against wandering vermin beasts. In practice, it meant a lot of blanket stealing and elbows in uncomfortable places.

Well, she'd apologise to Reynir later. Though, he'd have some apologising to do himself, if Emil woke up before him. Because Reynir had wrapped himself around the newest mage like a particularly cuddly octopus and didn't seem to be too keen to let go of his source of warmth.

At least Emil wasn't as bitey as Lalli. Small mercies.

She wiggled out of the sleeping pile and pulled Kitty up with her. She meowed in disgruntlement, but she didn't puff up or hiss, so Tuuri felt safe enough to go out and do her business in peace. Technically, she was supposed to have a *human* guard with her, but she didn't feel like waking one of them up just to watch her pull her pants down.

Business done, and the sun already halfway up the horizon, she decided it was safe enough to start some camp prep, as long as she was quiet.

She lit the stove and poured some of the disgusting stew into the pot, then let it simmer. The sun continued its slow and steady climb up the horizon, Kitty was purring in her lap and the air was crisp and fresh even through her mask.

In another life, it would have been a wonderful, peaceful morning. The people they were missing would simply still be asleep, the tank would still be working, their mission would be a success, and they wouldn't have to fear the sunset and the danger it brought.

It was a nice thought.

"OW! Hey!"

"Would you please get off me?!"

"What? Hey, stop kicking!"

"Off! Do you understand 'off'?!"

"Of? Of what?"

Aaaaaand there went the peaceful morning. Just in time to kick Tuuri out of her thoughts.

“Guys, guys! Shhhh!” Tuuri pulled the tent door open to shush them, “Emil, sit still. Reynir, let him go.”

The commands, spoken in Swedish and Icelandic respectively, were quickly followed. By some miracle, Lalli was still asleep and nothing was bruised but two egos. Soon all three of them were seated around the stove in some semblance of peace. It might have had something to do with the fact that both of them looked dead on their feet. Reynir was ladling the stew on autopilot, and Emil was looking at his bare hands, eyes glowing, like he wasn’t entirely sure they were his.

All in all, better than Tuuri had expected.

There was just one thing missing.

“Is Lalli still in the Dreamworld?” Tuuri asked halfway through breakfast, when it became clear Lalli wasn’t going to rise on his own.

Emil and Reynir froze. They exchanged worried looks with each other and the tent flap, then continued on eating more tense than before.

“Kinda,” Emil said, then turned to Reynir, “I thought you said he was supposed to wake up normally no matter whose Dreamspace he’s in?”

“He is!” Reynir waved his hands around nervously, “That’s what happened to me when I went to see Onni.”

“But maybe Finnish mages are different? Should we have put him back in his area before we woke up?”

“Can’t you ask him? Isn’t he still in your house?”

“H-hang on,” Tuuri frowned, reminding herself to speak Icelandic no matter what language she heard, “What’s going on? Where *is* Lalli?”

Reynir and Emil exchanged another worried look, grimaced simultaneously, then set their bowls down and explained what had happened last night.

By the end of it, Tuuri’s morning was solidly ruined, leaving her wondering which one of them she wanted to strangle *first*.

“You saw... The *Swan of Tuonela*... Come for Lalli’s soul... And you hid him away in Emil’s dreamspace,” Tuuri managed to squeeze through her teeth with great effort.

Emil and Reynir both looked nervous. “Is the swan... important?”

Tuuri lowered her face into her hands. She was *not* going to cry. Or laugh hysterically. Or do any combination of the two.

Strangulation of her idiotic teammates might still be in the cards, though.

“The Swan came for Lalli,” she repeated. It bore repeating. “But she didn’t get him.”

“Nnnnno?” Emil sounded uncertain, “He was still sleeping on my couch the last we saw him. And the swan flew away when I got back.”

“And he was breathing? He *just* looked like he was asleep?”

“Yeah,” Reynir nodded, “We kept checking. And he dried off eventually.”

Tuuri took a deep breath. Then another. *Then another.*

Calm. She was calm. She was perfectly, peacefully, sanguinely *calm*.

“Uuuuh, Tuuri?” Reynir asked hesitantly, “Are you okay?”

“*I am perfectly fine!*” Tuuri did her best to smile reassuringly. Judging by the way Emil and Reynir clutched at each other in abject fear, she might have missed the mark a tiny bit.

She took another calming breath and held it for four entire seconds, then tried to make the exhale last for eight. Then did it again. She never thought Onni’s weird breathing techniques would come in handy, but today was apparently the day.

“Right,” she said once the urge to panic passed, “You’d be better off asking Onni about this, but I *think* that this isn’t that different from losing your Luonto, just... the other way around. If I’m right, Lalli will have to sleep for a while until he regains enough energy to return. Which means, one of you *idiots* will have to carry him until he wakes up.”

Her voice went a little high and unsteady near the end, but she held onto her composure. Mostly.

Her cousin nearly got himself *killed* last night, and he’d been pressed up against her the entire time. She could have been sleeping next to his *corpse* for half the night while being none the wiser.

But it was fine. Lalli was going to be *fine*. She refused to believe otherwise. And hey, Reynir was pretty sure Sigrun and Mikkel survived too! This was *good* news!

It meant she was only going to strangle Lalli a *little bit* when he woke up.

“Right!” Tuuri slapped her palms on her thighs, sending the boys scrambling for each other again, “We’re not getting any younger here, are we?! Chop-chop, pack up!”

They didn’t need to be told twice. Under different circumstances she would have relished how they immediately hurried to obey her. As it was, she could only think about how Sigrun wouldn’t have had to scare them first.

She just had to keep reminding herself that their Captain was alive. Reynir had been right about impossible things before, and Lalli wouldn’t have risked so much if he wasn’t sure about it. They were alive.

Not much she could do about that now, though. All they could do now was keep walking and meet them there.

“So, uh,” Emil paused in loading up the wheelbarrow, “How are we doing this? None of us can drive the wheelbarrow by themselves, even without Lalli’s added weight, and we don’t have anything to use as a stretcher.”

“I can carry him on my back,” Reynir offered, “He’s really not that much heavier than a sheep, and we’ll be taking breaks along the way.”

“I’ll help with the wheelbarrow,” Tuuri said, “You and I are almost the same height, it’ll be easier to keep balance than with you and Reynir.”

“Alright,” Emil nodded, looking rather unhappy, “We’ll be slower like this, but I guess it’s only until Lalli wakes up. We’ll still make it in time.”

They packed everything up, Reynir hosted Lalli up on a piggyback ride, Tuuri and Emil took up a handlebar each, and on they went. Step by step, one after the other, in near perfect tandem.

Except, there were no footsteps to follow this time. Tuuri wondered why that gave her such a bad feeling in her stomach.

When Mikkell woke up sore, naked and cuddled up to an equally naked someone, his first thought was that he’d gotten drunk and had a one night stand again. Embarrassing enough when he was twenty-four, and would have been a horrifying lapse of judgement at thirty-four.

Then Sigrun coughed and reminded him that, while the situation was still dire, it didn’t merit sneaking out of bed and running into the night while frantically pulling his pants on.

Small mercies.

“Sigrun?” he gently shook her shoulder, “Wake up, it’s morning.”

“Nnnngh,” she groaned into his chest and attempted to bury herself deeper into the covers, “No, I forbid it to be morning.”

Despite himself, Mikkell smiled. “I don’t think you can put the sun on the mutiny list for rising.”

“Watch me.”

Mikkell sympathetically patted her back and wiggled out of their shelter to progressively louder protests. Only once her source of warmth had managed to escape did Sigrun finally let out a groan of surrender and attempted to get up.

Keyword being ‘attempted’.

“Woow,” she said, freshly laid out on her back, “Anybody got an ID on that tank?”

“Are you feeling dizzy?” Mikkell asked, this time wearing pants.

“It sure is spinny,” Sigrun groaned, digging the heels of her palms into her eye sockets “My head is killing me.”

Mikkell put a hand on her forehead. He could tell she was warmer than she was supposed to be, but he couldn’t tell if she was actually feverish. Their meagre medical supplies didn’t include antipyretics, anyway, so their options were limited.

Mikkell took a moment to examine her more fully. Her arms were doing only marginally better. The bite on her left arm was still infected, but at least it hadn’t gotten any worse than it was before she took yet another plunge into the ice cold sea. Her other arm was purple and swelling, but Sigrun was still able to move it in all the usual ways, just slowly and painfully. No worse than a Grade I sprain, or just a very nasty bruise. It still rendered her arm useless, either for holding a gun or knife.

Judging by the damningly blank look on her face, she knew it.

Mikkel decided there was nothing to it. The best thing he could do right now was get Sigrun to the outpost as soon as possible.

She was going to be fine. They'd gotten through worse, they'd get through this.

He collected her clothes and helped her sit up. She accepted the proffered uniform with disgruntled swearing, so Mikkel went to get himself dressed.

When he came back Sigrun had only put on her underwear and one sock. The other sock was crumpled in her fist, apparently forgotten in favor of tracing old, rather gruesome looking scars along her unsocked calf.

"I see what you meant by having stitches worse than mine," he attempted a bit of humour. Sigrun didn't seem to have heard him.

In the end, he sighed and took her uniform from her and just wrestled her thermals over her head like she was one of his younger sisters. Head went into the collar, arms carefully went into the sleeves, mindful of her injuries. The sling was relocated to her right arm, and the fresh bandages to her left.

"I think I saw Twigs last night," Sigrun muttered blearily as Mikkel was pulling her sock on, "Saw him at the outpost. He looked like he'd never seen a fjord before."

Mikkel squashed down his instinctual response, which was somewhere in between sceptical and patronising. He'd been given more than enough proof that, among this crew, dreams were rarely just dreams.

"What did he say?" he asked instead.

Sigrun rubbed her forehead. "Uhh, he asked if we're still alive. I think. And that... They were going to the outpost. Told him not to backtrack, and he said okay."

"Did he mention if the rest of the crew was alright?"

"No, but it's Twigs," Sigrun shrugged one shoulder, "If he didn't say anything, it probably means he didn't think anyone was hurt enough to mention. Shit, I didn't think to ask him. I just kept wondering how was he even there. Dreamwalking's supposed to be a mage-only ability, but I guess no one told the Finns that."

"Hmm," Mikkel said noncommittally. Reynir claimed he and Lalli conversed regularly in dreams, so he didn't see why reaching Sigrun would be more unlikely than reaching Reynir. Then again, his understanding of magic was rather sparse, but he supposed it had to have rules as well.

For now, he was going to assume Lalli really had found a way to contact Sigrun, and that the children were all fine and heading to the outpost. Lalli had probably memorised the way three times over, and Tuuri had packed an extra map of the area.

They were going to be fine.

"Come on," Mikkel pulled Sigrun up, "Lean on me. Do you think you can walk?"

"...barely," Sigrun muttered, looking less than happy about it, "For now."

“For however long you can,” Mikkell agreed, “When you can’t, I will carry you.”

“And when you can’t anymore?” Sigrun asked, tense and guarded.

“Then I will rest. And when we’re rested, we can continue,” he nodded agreeably. She could probably tell he knew what she meant and was avoiding it.

He was. He was too much of a coward not to.

“The sun is up,” Mikkell threw his arm around her to carry most of her weight. Not that there was much of it, compared to him. “We better start walking.”

Sigrun, clearly tired and groggy, didn’t protest. With a few false starts they found a pace that suited both of them, and started trekking north.

They were going to get there. They were, because Mikkell refused to let his ancestral lands swallow yet more blood of his people.

And so they went. Step by step, one after the other, in near perfect tandem.

They would get there.

Chapter End Notes

I'm back, bitches! And I finally got the characters across the damn room! That always takes forever.

EDIT: Okay, this chapter was a wee bit rushed when I posted it, so I had to go back and fix a few things, so don't worry if you see some new bits of text.

Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Every time Lalli wakes up he's still dreaming.

Never before had safety been so dangerous.

Chapter Notes

The finals are turning my brain into a sponge over here. Ugh, two more weeks and I'm done, I just have to keep reminding myself of that. Two more weeks and I'm free.

In the meantime, have a short but ominous chap.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Lalli was tired. So, so tired. It felt like someone had split his chest open and filled it with rocks to weigh him down, then done the same thing to his limbs, one by one, finishing with his head. Thankfully, he was also warm and lying on something comfortable. He was vaguely aware that there were cats around him, but he couldn't muster up the energy to shoo the annoying pests away. Gods only knew why they liked him so much, but whenever he fell asleep in a room with unfamiliar cats, at least one of them always found its way to his side or back to lay down for a nap.

Stupid cats. They were lucky they were warm.

Lalli managed to lift his head just enough to completely unhinge his jaw with the force of his yawn. That done, he set his head back down on his paws and went back to-

Wait a minute... Paws?

(He only had paws when he was hurt, and out of his body, where-)

For a full minute, Lalli seriously considered if opening his eyes was worth having to confront reality. Sleeping was nice, and he couldn't sense any danger nearby, did he really have to open his eyes and see if he did, indeed, have paws?

...He wasn't in any danger. It could wait.

So Lalli went back to sleep.

The next time he was drawn to consciousness, it was by cats hissing right next to his head. He peeked open one eye just enough to see a malformed, three-headed cat spirit hissing at another malformed cat spirit. Strangely, even though the other cat was bigger, it cowered before the three headed one, then

swiftly turned tail and ran. Only when it was on the other side of the room did the other one calm down.

(The cat was dangerous but which one, why, what did it-)

Once it ascertained that no other cats were foolish enough to challenge it, it walked over to Lalli, turned around itself once, curled up and went to sleep, haunches to hips pressed against Lalli's furry side.

The sight was strange enough that it actually made Lalli lift his head and open both eyes. Something about this cat seemed familiar, and... Not in a good way. But he could sense no malicious intent coming from it, and the specific memory that explained *why* this cat was familiar seemed far away.

"Are you a *Haltja*?" Lalli asked. It seemed like a safe assumption, for an unknown spirit that seemed protective rather than malicious. If Lalli had encroached on its territory uninvited it would also explain why his first instinct was to be wary. Protective spirits were not very welcoming to trespassers.

"No," one of the cat's heads replied, "*I don't know what I am.*"

Well, that seemed as good an answer as any. Lalli closed his eyes and settled back to sleep.

"*Are you alright, Kitten?*"

Kitten? Why did that sound familiar?

(A great beast came, and there was water in his lungs, and he was screaming, screaming and nothing was coming out-)

Lalli yawned. "Tired."

"*Then rest. You are safe here.*"

Lalli already knew that. He went back to sleep.

The next time he woke, it was to someone warm running their fingers through his fur soothingly. Lalli peeked his eyes open to see who it was.

"Hi," Emil smiled at him kindly, his hand shifting to scratch the backs of Lalli's ears *juuuuuust right*.

"Sorry to wake you up, but do you know where Lalli is?" Emil asked, voice barely above a whisper. "I've looked everywhere, even his area, but I can't find him. I'm getting kinda worried."

What a stupid question. Why was he asking where Lalli was when he literally had his fingers in Lalli's fur? Still, he was an *excellent* ear scratcher, so Lalli closed his eyes and started purring in reassurance.

"Does that mean you don't know, or just won't tell me?"

Lalli purred louder.

"Right," Emil sighed and then *stopped petting him*, "Maybe Reynir can find him, he's better at this than I am. But you can stay here while we look."

“Mrrrrr,” Lalli opened his eyes just enough to glare at the stupid Swede. He was right here! And he had *liked* the petting!

“Yep, you’re definitely Lalli’s,” Emil laughed quietly, “You can go back to sleep, don’t worry. We’ll find your human.”

Absolutely hopeless, Lalli decided. Had he been the type to do that, he would have rolled his eyes at Emil. Onni was going to despair of Lalli’s taste in boyfriends.

(He was going to despair about a lot more than-)

Still, it didn’t seem worth getting up for. Lalli was warm and comfortable, a rare luxury as of late, and he wasn’t going to give it up just because Emil was being more stupid than usual. And they weren’t in any danger here. He could be as stupid as he wanted.

Except... It was getting warmer now, almost past the point of comfort. The cat cuddled up to him was stirring, and a strange light appeared, strong enough Lalli could see it through his eyelids.

He peeked them open, and saw the most beautiful magic.

Emil was standing by the open window, a ball of flames with every color of the rainbow in his hand. A river of orange fire was floating in from the outside, gently guided by Emil’s other hand, flowing to join the rest of the vibrant flames.

Emil’s face was intent, focused, and his eyes were glowing so bright Lalli couldn’t look at them straight. Sparks of fire were flying in the wind around him, but fizzled out in the air, tangling in his hair and producing a golden glow.



He looked beautiful. Powerful. (*Dangerous. He was a danger, Onni was right, but-*)

Lalli couldn't look away.

The fire stopped flowing in soon, and stayed swirling in Emil's hands. He held it close to his chest, like he was shielding it from harm. Or shielding the outside from it.

He turned around, and walked over to the fireplace.

Without the fire nearly blinding him, Lalli thought he saw something strange on Emil. Armor, the likes of which he'd never seen before, shoulder guards and vambraces plated in gold, but his arms bare. Thick leather, carved with a strange motif, covered his back, and underneath it billowed a long, pure white duster. A carved horn on his hip, and a crown of golden wings atop his head, signifying something Lalli had no knowledge of.

But then he reached the fireplace, and gently laid down the flames inside. They sparked, rose in a plume, and disappeared up the chimney in the same blinding flash as they entered.

Lalli shut his eyes in the flash, and when he blinked them open again, everything had changed back. Briefly, Lalli wondered if he'd dreamed it.

“I hope I didn’t scare you,” Emil said, when he saw Lalli looking, “The fire won’t hurt you here. You’re safe.”

Lalli already knew that. Why did everybody feel the need to incessantly repeat it?

No matter. Lalli was too tired to wonder about Swedes and their ridiculousness. The cat by his side curled up and went to sleep again, warm against his belly. And so did Lalli, because he was tired, and this was a safe place to sleep.

Even if the dreams were really strange here.

The next time Lalli woke up, it was to hushed voices and broken snippets of conversation.

“-you sure it’s him? I mean, it’s a lynx-”

“-happened to Onni after-”

“-anyone told him? Should we-”

“-bad idea, he was really scared-”

“-still thinks I’m a Kade?”

“-if he’d believe me when I said ‘no’-”

“-still try to kill me-”

“-...could he?”

“-find out in Iceland-”

(Onni, they were talking about Onni, was he alright, what happened, did he know-)

Lalli yawned hard enough to unhinge his jaw, in the same motion stretching all four of his legs forward. The three-headed cat, which hadn’t moved away since the last time Lalli checked, looked up at him, rubbed one of its cheeks against him, and went back to sleep.

Yawning and stretching done, he looked at the source of the conversation. There were the stupid foreigners, sitting hunched around a half-eaten cake. They hadn’t even bothered with individual plates, just working on the same cake from two different sides. Lalli would have joined them, but the cake they were eating was... brown.

He decided he wasn’t that hungry.

They looked... They looked the way Onni did when Tuuri was doing something he considered dangerous. Were they worried about Lalli? No, why would they be? He wasn’t in any danger here. Though... he still wasn’t exactly sure where ‘here’ was.

(Lost he was lost where was he and where was his body-)

Ugh, he was too tired to worry about this. He was too tired to *think*. No matter how hard he was trying to listen to what Emil and Reynir were saying, his mind kept wandering and his eyes were threatening

to close. His jaw unhinged with another yawn against his will, at which point Lalli decided maybe it was better to give it up as a lost cause.

He was safe here, this he knew. Therefore, both Emil and Reynir were safe as well, and didn't need him. If he wasn't needed, it was alright to go back to sleep.

He closed his eyes and let oblivion take him.

Someone was petting him out of his sleep.

"Lalli?" a familiar, faintly hesitant voice asked. Emil.

"Mrrp?"

"Reynir woke up a minute ago, so we need to get going. Are you going to be alright here?"

"Prrrrh," Lalli said, "Yes."

"...it really is you," Emil's hand paused for a moment at the nape of Lalli's neck. Lalli pushed his head firmly into Emil's palm, and his stupid boyfriend thankfully took the hint.

"You like this?" Emil asked in faint disbelief. Lalli slitted one eye open and purred louder.

"Okay, okay," Emil smiled. He looked relieved. "You can get back to sleep until you recover. We'll take care of your body in the meantime."

(My body, still there, I need to get back to it, I NEED TO WAKE UP-)

He yawned and lowered his head. Emil's sentence struck him as odd for some reason, but his tone was reassuring.

"Keep an eye on him, okay? Thank you," Emil told someone, and with one last stroke down Lalli's spine, he faded from the dream like a ghost.

Lalli closed his eyes again, though he didn't fall asleep immediately this time. Instead, he cast his senses around the room, hoping to find something... Something that made *sense*. Something that-

(Was he dead, he was dreaming, this was a dream, was this what Tuonela was like, endless dreams that made no sense, and he was so tired, but he was dead-)

"You need to stop doing that," an almost-familiar voice spoke, "You will just tire yourself out further."

Lalli fought against the exhaustion in his limbs and his mind, and with sheer stubbornness managed to lift his head and open his eyes.

It was the three-headed cat, still tucked against his side, that spoke.

"It is this place," it spoke without Lalli asking, "We were... lost, for so long. So scared, and tired. Desperately fighting the endless nothing. But here... We couldn't fight anymore. So we slept. Slept and rested, until we were no longer angry, no longer tired. Now, we just are."

It paused for a moment. Lalli nearly fell asleep before it spoke again.

“Sleep,” it said, “Even if you never wake up, you will be safe here.”

(He didn't need to be safe, he had a duty to fulfill, he needed to be out there, he needed to help-)

Lalli yawned, losing his train of thought. Sleep... Yes, that sounded like a good idea.

It was safe here. He could sleep in peace.

He woke up to the sound of his name.

“-was still sleeping, but was otherwise okay,” someone was saying. It sounded like Emil. “And don't tell him I said that, but he looks very cute as a lynx.”

Lalli purred. ‘Cute’ wasn't usually an acceptable word to describe him, but from Emil it was okay.

“Wow. Is it just me, or is Kitty sounding more like the tank engine than usual?”

“Hmm? No, she always purrs like this.” That sounded like Reynir. “Anyway, are you sure we shouldn't bring him back to his area? Not that I'm complaining, but... He's getting kinda heavy to carry. Do you think he'll wake up faster in his own dream realm?”

“I keep telling you to ask Onni.” That was Tuuri! Lalli lifted his head and managed to force his eyes to open.

What he saw was... Strange. It was like he was sitting in front of the campfire with Reynir and Tuuri, except... not. Almost like he was looking through the window.

“I've never even heard of something like this happening, how am I supposed to know?” Tuuri continued.

“Wait, never?”

“No! I'm not a mage, remember? I only know what Onni told me, and what I overheard Grandma teaching him and Lalli. I know mages can lose their Luonto because it happened to Onni once, when Keuruu was attacked. He slept for three days then too. But what you two are saying, that Lalli's out of his area and not waking up, and that's after he nearly *died*...”

(The beast with the horns and the red eyes, pulling him down and crushing him, he drowned, he drowned, and he wasn't coming up-)

Lalli's eyes closed without his permission. When he opened them again he was calm, and the conversation was still going on.

“-you sure about this?” Reynir asked, “It's, well- You know what Lalli said, about Onni.”

“I don't.” Tuuri sounded worried, “What did Lalli say about Onni?”

“Uh, he kinda said Onni told him to kill me before I woke up-”

“WHAT?!”

“Back before we didn't know what was happening to me!” Emil hurried to reassure her, “Apparently, holding multiple souls of dead trolls in one body is usually something only a Kade can do, and Onni

was worried I was going to become one. And, well, we haven't exactly had time to inform him otherwise, so we don't really know how he'll react when he sees me."

Emil was talking, but Lalli couldn't see him through the strange window. It made all of his fur stand on end. His words didn't help either. He knew there was a chance Onni would try to kill him and he wanted to contact him anyway? *Why?* What in the world was so important that Emil was willing to risk it?

"But... You said it yourself, he's the only one who might know what's happening to Lalli," Emil paused, then, with steel-toed determination said, "And he's worth the risk. I'll go tonight."

(No. Not tonight, not before Lalli could explain. He was risking making Lalli's cousin kill him, STUPID STUPID EMIL, NO HE COULDN'T DO THAT HE HAD TO STOP LALLI HAD TO STOP HIM, HE COULDN'T LET HIM WALK INTO DANGER AGAIN, HE COULDN'T LOSE HIM TOO NONONONONO-)

Lalli, desperate, grit his teeth and tried to force himself to stand, to do something, anything, to stope Emil, but-

His head swirled like he had forgotten to eat for the entire day. His paws suddenly refused to obey him and collapsed under him, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't open his eyes again.

This... This was not good.

"Emil..." he whispered, the simple name sapping the last of his strength. The lights dimmed before his eyes, in flashes and spurts, and finally swirled into oblivion.

The crackling of fire sounded so loud in Lalli's ears, he heard nothing else.

Chapter End Notes

Oh ba hum GEE, it's almost like the consequences of being stranded in the mind of an ordinary non-mage and a guide whose mind was specifically altered to contain malevolent spirits are DIFFERENT. *gasp*

EDIT: NOW WITH ART THAT STOPPED MY HEART AAAAAAAAAAAAAA. gO BOW DOWN TO THE MARVELOUS [RITA](#) !!!!

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